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APRIL 2007
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Are they clean *and* green?

45 laundry detergents tested



Vegetables
Are fresh always best?

and reverse mortgages
Games supermarkets play!



Jane Mackenzie
Editor

An old argument

In the first article in this issue — *The whole truth*, page 8 — we return to an old consumer complaint: the impossibility of easily comparing prices of packaged goods. If a 1.2 kg can of dog food costs \$2.65, is that better or worse value than a 700 g can costing \$1.27? Without resorting to a calculator it's too hard to work it out — and most people don't have the time to bother for every item they're buying, even with a calculator.

CHOICE has always argued that if shops displayed a so-called unit price — the cost per 100 g, per kilogram, litre or even per 100 tissues — shoppers would be in a much better position to judge value. And in many parts of the world it's compulsory for supermarkets to do just that: it's a legal requirement in the European Union and is widely used in some US states.

So why is Australia still behind the times in consumer protection? The supermarkets have various arguments for why they don't introduce unit pricing for packaged goods, none of which stands up in the face of the overseas experience. One retailer even displays unit prices in its European shops and website but not in its Australian ones; another does it on its shopping website but not in its shops.

It's hard not to conclude that the supermarkets don't want unit pricing because they don't want Australian shoppers to be able to work out which products are the best value. That's a pretty shameful approach from businesses that affect the spending of practically every household in the country.

Finally, thank you to everyone who contacted us with responses to CHOICE's new design. We didn't mean to give you eyestrain — the overwhelming comment was that the new type was too faint, making the articles too hard to read; we've changed that in this issue.

We'd still like your feedback, though — if we've fixed the main problem, how well does the new design work for you in other areas?

Coming soon ...

Gas heaters

Instant, efficient heat (and less CO₂ than with most electricity).



Breakfast cereals

Which is the best way to start your day?



Home hair colour

Covering the grey — which brands do it best?



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We test and rate products and services. Our ratings are based on quality without regard to price, and are derived from lab tests, expert judgments and reader surveys. If a product is high in quality and relatively low in price, we deem it a Best Buy. A rating applies only to the brand and model tested, not to other models sold under the same brand name, unless so noted.

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Switch turns off for light bulbs



Up to 90% of the energy output of a standard light bulb is wasted, mainly as heat, and Federal Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull recently announced that these standard incandescent light bulbs will be phased out by 2009–10. They'll be replaced by energy-saving compact fluorescent (long-life) light bulbs.

A long-life bulb uses only about 20% of the energy of the standard bulb it replaces: a 20 W long-life bulb can replace a 100 W standard one, for example. So using them benefits the environment right away. And over 8000 hours, a 20 W long-life bulb produces about 600 kg less CO₂ than a 100 W standard bulb (if the energy is generated in a coal-burning power plant).

And the good news is that long-life bulbs have come down in price over recent years and are likely to come down further with greater numbers sold. They last four to 10 times longer than standard bulbs, so while they're still more expensive to buy they'll more than make up for it in reduced running costs over their life. Lighting can contribute up to 12% of a household's electricity consumption, so saving 80% of that will make a visible dent in your electricity bill.

Phasing out standard light bulbs is estimated to reduce emissions by 800,000 tonnes on average between 2008 and 2012, and by four million tonnes by 2015.

A few technical issues will need to be resolved during the phase-in period up to 2009–10: for example, currently you can't use long-life bulbs with dimmers or enclosed light fittings.

Tips:

- You get the most benefit of using long-life bulbs in areas where they're switched on for long periods of time — for example, in living areas or the hallway. Some manufacturers say frequent on/off switching reduces the bulbs' life.
- They come in different light 'colours', so you can create different atmospheres in different rooms.
- For staircases, look for a bulb that comes on quickly — some take a few seconds to illuminate.

BE A SAVVY CONSUMER

While you may be fully aware of a business having taken you for a ride, perhaps you're unsure of how to exercise your rights as a consumer.

To clear up any confusion, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) recently published a new guide called *Know how to complain: stand up for your consumer rights*. It outlines the rights and protection you have under the Trade Practices Act as a consumer. It also sets out the steps you can take against the business in question and the relevant organisations that may be able to help you.

According to the Trade Practices

Act, it's illegal for a business to:

- Mislead or deceive you.
- Make any false claims about a good or service.
- Advertise something for a price if it knows it can't supply it within a reasonable amount of time.
- Accept payment for a good or service it doesn't intend to supply.

Included in *Know how to complain* is a three-step process that should allow your grievances to be resolved, and what the ACCC can and can't do to help. The guide encourages consumers to:

- Approach the business with your concern and the outcome you would like. If this is unsuccessful, move to step two.

- Make a written complaint to the business, either to the manager or head office, outlining your complaints. Ask for a response within two weeks.
- If the issue is still not resolved, contact the ACCC or another third party, such as an industry ombudsman, who can further assist you.

The ACCC says it's important for consumers to know their rights as "better informed consumers are better armed to deal effectively with businesses and demand high-quality goods and services".

The *Know how to complain* guide is available free from

www.accc.gov.au or by calling the ACCC on 1300 302 502.



Rents on the way up

The Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) has warned of significant rent increases to come this year. Rents went up 3.7% last year and the RBA says information on new rental contracts suggests much larger increases.

Since the mid 1990s house prices in Australian capital cities have increased by around 175%. In the same period rents have increased only 35–60%. With rents low compared to the cost of buying a house, demand for rental accommodation is high and vacancy rates are at their lowest level since the early 1980s. These low vacancy rates have contributed to the current rise in rents.



An additional factor is that the rental return landlords have received from their investment property compared to the price of the property has been substantially reduced, making it a less attractive proposition.

However, the outlook isn't all bad: in the long run growth in rents could boost construction, which could eventually lead to more rental properties becoming available.

Stroller wheel guards

In November 2005 we reported on toddler seat attachments for strollers, including PHIL & TEDS E3 Double Kit E3DK11 V2. We were concerned that when the PHIL & TEDS toddler seat is attached at the rear of the E3 stroller, the child seated in it could reach the rear wheels. Our assessment was backed up by a consumer complaint that their child had done exactly that, and sustained a friction burn on the arm.

PHIL & TEDS told us then it was considering adding wheel guards for extra safety. The rear wheel guards became available as optional accessories in late 2006. Interestingly, though, the guards are marketed as mudguards rather than safety devices.

In December 2006, the US Consumer Product Safety Commission issued a voluntary recall of PHIL & TEDS E3 strollers with double seats, again due to the risk of a child reaching the rear wheels. It recommends users stop using the Double Kit seat in the rear position and contact the US distributor for a free set of wheel guards.

To see whether the rear wheel guards solve the problem, we bought a set and fitted them to a PHIL & TEDS E3 stroller with the Double Kit seat attached. We're pleased to say that when installed according to the supplied



instructions they do reduce the risk of a child touching the rear wheels. They cover the wheel top and part of its upper inside face, which are the areas in immediate reach of a properly harnessed child in the rear seat. However, other parts of the wheel and the brake levers remain potentially accessible.

The stroller now comes with the wheel guards included, but some older stock without guards might still be in stores. If you already own an E3 stroller with Double Kit, you can get a free set of wheel guards from your nearest retailer. We recommend you do; they'll help keep your toddler's hands safe.

ADVERTISING BROADBAND SPEED

It's annoying to find your broadband connection much slower than you expected, even more so if you changed your internet service provider (ISP) because the new one claimed faster speeds. The industry practice of advertising hypothetical speeds that can't be achieved in the real world could be downright misleading.

Concerned about this practice, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) has issued an information paper with a checklist for the industry to help ISPs comply with their obligations under the *Trade Practices Act 1974* when advertising their broadband services.

"The paper focuses on ADSL2+ because consumers may be attracted to these services by speed claims," ACCC Chairman Graeme Samuel said.

ADSL stands for Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line, a technology that uses the copper wire phone network to deliver broadband services from a telephone exchange to the customer's home. While in theory ADSL2+ can achieve rates of 24 Megabits per second (Mbps), the actual speed will be lower, depending on your distance from the exchange, the line quality of the copper wire between you and the exchange, electrical interference from outside sources, the number of other users of the cable, your hardware and software, and even the website you're trying to download.

According to the ACCC, ISPs should avoid using hypothetical speeds in headlines and should list in their advertising all factors that affect the speeds. If maximum speeds are quoted, they must be achievable by a reasonable number of potential customers.

Cheeky marketing

Egg boxes with only 10 eggs, gin and tonic with no gin? It seems that next time you head down the shopping aisles, you'll need to keep your eyes open.

A CHOICE staff member got a little less than he bargained for recently when he picked up a box of ECOEGGS from the supermarket. The producer claims the eggs are from certified free-range hens and are antibiotic-free and "naturally richer" — whatever that means.

The eggs come packed in what looks like a standard egg box of 12 and cost around \$5.99. It was only when our shopper got the eggs home that he noticed something was awry. Instead of 12 eggs nestled in the box there was space for just 10. While he eventually found some small print on the box saying it contained 10 eggs, if you weren't looking for it you'd easily pick up the box thinking it held the usual 12.

The distributor of ECOEGGS says the boxes it uses are from Europe and were chosen because they're strong and provide good protection from breakage — and these preferred boxes are only available in a 10-pack. However, ECOEGGS says it's asked the package manufacturer to consider making a box that will hold 12 eggs in the future.

All very well, though we note that the manufacturer of this particular egg carton advertises both a 10- and a 12-pack option on its website already.

You may remember during CHOICE's inaugural Shonky Awards in November last year that we awarded a 'Shonky' for the most creative product name to SEAGERS Gin and Tonic with a Squeeze of Lime. This drink won the award because the ingredients on the can showed that the drink contained neither gin (it was vodka) nor quinine (a key ingredient in tonic water), or indeed any lime at all.

Since our award it seems things have changed in the SEAGERS world, though not necessarily for the better. The Gin and Tonic, still bereft of its lime and tonic water, is now made from what's listed as simply a "distilled spirit."

A quick call to Independent Distillers, which produces the drink, confirmed that the can has been "relabelled" but the people there were unable to tell us what kind of distilled spirit it is. Our bet is that it's still not gin.



CORRECTION

WATER-EFFICIENT SHOWERHEADS CHOICE, March 2007

On page 30 we showed a photo of the DELRANA LUXURY SHOWERS Kestrel Rose showerhead instead of the Best Buy DELRANA Marlin Rose.

The photo, right, shows what the Marlin Rose looks like, to help find it when you're shopping.



PROTECT YOUR BACK

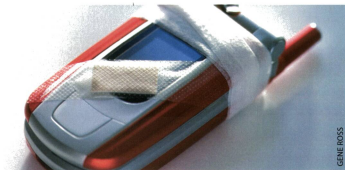
Sick of getting your textbooks soaked in the rain from an umbrella that's dripping onto your backpack? The Japanese *Monthly Consumer* reports on an interesting invention: an asymmetrical umbrella, egg-shaped with a longer piece at the back that'll protect the load you carry on your back, whether that's books, the shopping or your baby in a backpack. Now, when will we get the parent-and-child parasol for Australian conditions?

BE WARNED

We thought you'd enjoy reading some of the silly or senseless warnings the US *Consumer Report's* 'Selling it' page (the equivalent to our 'Hard Word') collected, such as: *Do not use for sleeping; for decorative purposes only* on an inflatable travel pillow, or *Opening with sharp object may damage the product* on a cutting board ("But slicing tomatoes won't?" asks CR). Then there's the wine club's warning *Do not deliver to an intoxicated person* ("If the person seems happy, break out a breathalyzer," comments CR), the car sunshade warning *Vehicle shouldn't be driven with sunshade in the window* (CR: "Or with a paper bag over the driver's head"), and the frozen pizza that warns: *Product becomes hot when cooked* (CR: "And cold when frozen") and, to top it all off: *Never use this lamp around living children.*

IT'S A RIP-OFF!

Living costs in Britain are higher than anywhere apart from Japan, Scandinavia, Ireland and the US, reports the UK consumer magazine, *Which?*. So it's no wonder seven out of 12 *Which?* members think living in Britain is a rip-off. And stocking up on cheaper items when abroad or buying over the internet won't always elude the rip-off, as one reader found who had to pay duty on the original purchase price as well as on postage and packaging: "Rip-off Britain rips you off even if you try to avoid being ripped off."



GENE ROSS

Passing the buck

I read your article about mobile phone repairs and complaints (*Out of service*, CHOICE, Jan/Feb 2007) with great interest. My own experience is that mobile phone retailers are fundamentally breaching the law when they try to flick-pass any handset problems to the phone manufacturer. Both federal and state laws impose warranty liability on both the retailer and the manufacturer/importer.

In my case, the company that sold me the handset and service contract said in no uncertain terms that it had no responsibility in relation to the handset, but would send it to the manufacturer. I queried this and was told, "That's what's stated in our manual; we've been told never to accept any liability for the handset." My handset was only a few months old. I had constant problems with it (which neither the manufacturer or retailer fixed). I eventually threw

it out and bought a PDA. I hope that your article will be a wake-up call for the mobile phone retailers.

Hank, NSW

This is yet another example of a mobile phone retailer providing misleading advice about consumers' statutory rights. The company selling the handset has clear legal responsibilities to provide a repair, refund or replacement if the phone isn't up to scratch.

We've written to the Minister for Communications, all state and territory Fair Trading Ministers, the Australian Communications and Media Authority and Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, outlining our research findings and our recommendations on how these problems should be addressed. Now it's time for some action.

Some like it hot

My husband and I recently bought three 'pillow-top' beds from a

major furniture retailer. Luckily only one was delivered first off. We have found, to our dismay, that it is terribly hot to sleep in. Even with one person sleeping in the bed you wake up wet and sweating. I complained to the manager of the store, who said we could change the other two beds (as they hadn't been delivered) and that one out of five of his customers complained about this overheating problem. He said it had something to do with the foam Sealy used. He suggested I try jumping on the bed to "break up the foam" as this may make it more breathable. Why was this not mentioned when we were purchasing the beds?

What foam does Sealy use? Is it safe? Why does it not 'breathe'? Surely when you buy a bed of a well known brand you are entitled to quality. Unfortunately we are stuck with the bed we have had for a few days, and although we can change the other two for different beds, we are locked into dealing with the same store, as we signed a monthly payment contract with a 20% cancellation fee.

Dianne, NSW

Sealy told us that some consumers had reported the overheating issue, but it had received less than two complaints for every 10,000 Sealy beds sold.

THUMBS UP!

- Nesha, via email, would like to give a Thumbs-up to QANTAS HOLIDAYS, which refunded a portion of her accommodation costs after she alerted them to her dissatisfaction with the facilities she'd booked.
- Arthur from Queensland gives a Thumbs-up to the services of the SAMSUNG support team after he accidentally used t-shirt transfer paper in his laser printer, rendering it useless. Four hours later a repairman was at his door to replace an expensive part of his printer — at no cost.

The company disagrees that the foam is the root cause of the overheating problem and strongly advises against jumping on the bed. It has identified two possible causes.

- As there's more contact with the plush layers of a pillow-top mattress, the heat radiated by the body can be absorbed by the mattress and retained, resulting in the user feeling warmer than when using a firmer mattress.
- Owners may also continue to use the same level of bedding (quilts and blankets) with a plush mattress, when this may no longer be necessary.

Sealy suggests the problem can be fixed by the use of cotton mattress protectors and sheets, reducing the number of quilts and blankets and/or using air conditioning or fans to cool the bedroom.

When asked if the company had considered making this information available to consumers when they're buying the mattress, Sealy said it would make it available if it believed it was an issue every customer should be aware of.

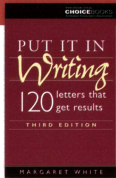
So now you know.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

We want to hear from you — your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. Positive outcomes you've had to a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or tradesperson interest us too. Address these letters to Thumbs up at the address on page 2.

To thank you for writing to us, *Your Letters* awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner, Hank from NSW, receives *Put it in writing*, or any other book of his choice from the list on choice.com.au/books.

We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract. See page 2 for how to reach us.



It pays to have a healthy degree of scepticism about supermarkets' sales tactics and the tricks they and manufacturers play to get us to buy more products or pay more for smaller quantities, for example.

But knowing that some 'specials' aren't really all that special and that manufacturers sometimes reduce packet and tin sizes while keeping prices the same is one thing; doing something about it to make better choices is another — it just seems too hard.

This is particularly true for those of us who haven't the time (or can't be bothered) to take along a calculator and comprehensively compare the value of variously priced and sized products during our routine grocery shop.

Easier comparisons

CHOICE thinks supermarkets should display the unit price (such as the price per 100 g, kilogram or litre, and even per 100 tissues or sheets of toilet paper) for all products. This relatively simple change would allow shoppers to make accurate price comparisons between different brands and sizes, saving time and money.

Unit pricing is widely used in some US states and in Europe (it's a legal requirement in some countries — see *European experience*, right, for more), but retailers in Australia are resistant to its introduction. COLES and WOOLWORTHS/SAFEWAY gave reasons such as a lack of consumer demand for unit pricing, opposition from suppliers and the extra costs. However, COLES does show unit pricing on its shopping website.

However, consumers in Australia may not be demanding unit pricing because they're not aware that it can be applied to packaged goods. We think shoppers would use unit pricing if it was there, just as they already do when buying meat, vegetables, petrol and smallgoods.

And if the costs are so prohibitive, how does international discount retailer ALDI survive? Its low-cost shops all over Europe use unit pricing, so surely it could do so in Australia too. In fact its website, www.aldi.com, shows the price per 100 g or mL on its European pages, while the Australian part of the same website doesn't show these unit prices. Unfortunately, ALDI says it follows Australian pricing practice and has no plans to introduce new pricing arrangements.

The whole truth

IN A NUTSHELL

- We want supermarkets to display the unit price (such as the price per kilogram or litre) for all relevant items. They already have to do it for meat, fruit and vegetables. Unit price displays would save shoppers time and money.
- It'd also help you spot supermarket sales tactics — such as when buying a larger pack doesn't provide the best value.

There's a simple way for supermarkets to help shoppers get value for money, save time and make better choices.



European experience

Unit pricing is a legal requirement in the European Union. Prior to the introduction of mandatory unit price information in the UK, a survey of 1000 consumers in stores already providing this information found:

- 77% agreed that all food retailers should have to give unit prices across their entire product range.
- 61% had used unit pricing at some time and 51% used it frequently.
- When provided with only the total price and weight for six different sizes of baked beans, just 7% of consumers could accurately calculate the lowest unit price.
- When provided with unit price information 78% identified the cheapest option.
- Providing unit price information reduced the average time needed to identify the cheapest option from 58 seconds to 18 seconds. ■

Consumer frustration

David Nolan contacted us asking why shops don't have unit pricing.

"I'm finding myself increasingly frustrated by the way big supermarkets conceal the true pricing of food by varying the quantities to odd sizes, using specials on the smaller-sized product and not the bigger size, etc," he says.

"I'm beginning to think carrying a calculator around with me would be a good idea. I also think many consumers haven't the time or can't be bothered to work out the best price and hence are paying too much. Supermarkets shouldn't be allowed to make extra profits by obscuring the true price of their goods. You can't trust the old saying 'Buy in bulk and save' in all cases any more."



DAVID NOLAN

Example 1. When a bigger tin is worse value

In this case, the unit price of the 1.2 kg of Pedigree dog food works out at 22% more expensive than the same product in the smaller-sized tin. How many people would opt for the larger quantity, assuming they'd save money? If supermarkets displayed the price per kg, you'd know their respective prices were \$2.21 per kg and \$1.81 per kg.



Price	Quantity	Price per kg
\$2.65	1.2 kg	\$2.21

Price	Quantity	Price per kg
\$1.27	700 g	\$1.81

AUSTRALIAN STUDY

Ian Jarratt of the Queensland Consumers' Association has been awarded a grant (Churchill Fellowship) to undertake research on the use of unit pricing in Europe and the US.

"My research has already shown that in the 25-nation European Union (population 450 million) and in several states in the USA, supermarkets must provide shoppers with this information for almost every item on sale," he says.

"Many Australian shoppers don't work out the unit price of goods because it's difficult and time-consuming. As a result, often they don't get the best value for their money, because the unit price varies greatly between package sizes and brands." Ian's report and recommendations are expected to be published in mid 2007.

Example 2. Cornflake choices

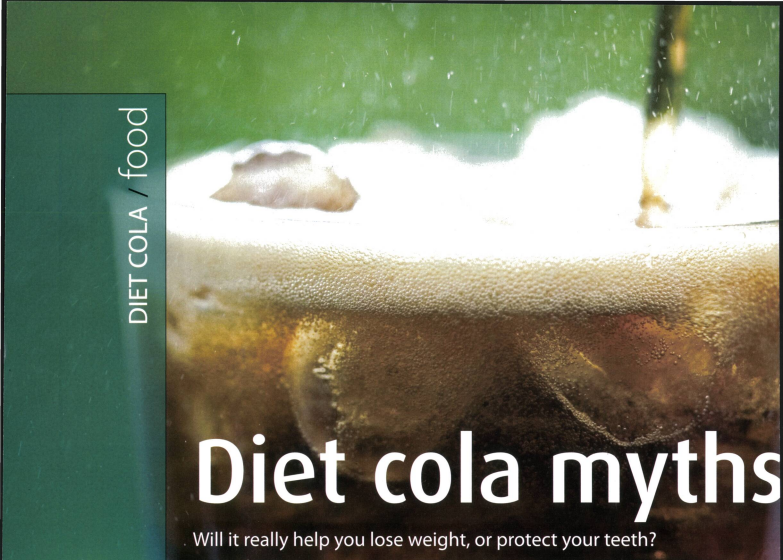
There wasn't much difference between the 525 g and 825 g packets of Kellogg's Cornflakes in terms of value for money (around 2%) when we checked. But the 310 g box works out as 38% more expensive than the 825 g box, and if you like those cute little single-serve packets, expect to pay 170% to 600% more for the convenience. Displaying the price per 100 g or per kg would make these realities clearer.

Often, buying supermarkets' own-brand varieties results in significant savings (up to 30% or so in this instance if you chose the 500 g COLES Smart Buy box, instead of the 525 g Kellogg's box, and bigger savings if you chose larger packets). Unit pricing would make the true costs obvious, helping you identify the premium for a well-known brand name and whether it's worth paying.



GENE ROSS

All prices collected in a large Sydney supermarket, December 2006.



Diet cola myths

Will it really help you lose weight, or protect your teeth?

IN A NUTSHELL

- If you drink diet cola our taste test suggests you might enjoy one of the cheaper brands as much as the heavily promoted big names.
- But: diet cola might not be as helpful in the fight against flab as you'd think, kids risk overdosing on the artificial sweeteners, and it's still harmful for your teeth.

If you drink diet cola, chances are it's to avoid the sugar in the regular version, perhaps to help you lose weight or for the sake of your teeth. But there are a few things you might believe about diet cola that don't stand up in reality.

Myth 1: Big-name diet colas taste better

Last year Coca-Cola Amatil spent more than \$18 million on promoting Coke Zero alone. And these big corporations aren't wasting their money — if you enjoy a diet cola, chances are you'll grab a Diet Coke or a Pepsi Max. But there are much cheaper brands of diet cola in the supermarkets and chain stores — do the big brands really taste better? To find out we asked a few hundred consumers at a Sydney shopping centre to taste and rate 11 brands of diet cola. The brands were:

- Australia's Choice Diet Cola (KMart).
- Black & Gold Diet Cola (IGA).
- Classic Taste Diet Cola (Aldi).
- Coca-Cola Zero.
- Diet Coke.
- Home Brand Diet Cola (Woolworths).
- LA Diet Ice Cola.
- LA Maxi Ice Cola.
- Pepsi Light.

- Pepsi Max.
- You'll Love Coles Diet Cola (Coles).

The colas were identified only by code numbers so the tasters didn't know which brands they were tasting. We recruited 277 tasters who said they regularly drink diet cola — 40% of them male, and 42% of them aged between 10 and 18. Each tasted four colas and rated them on a five-point scale to indicate how much they liked the taste.

Overall the tasters liked no one brand more or less than average. And it was the same when we separated the results for adults and young people under 18 — neither group had any clear favourites.

The manufacturers of Coke and Pepsi pass on their huge marketing budgets to consumers as higher prices. So why not ignore the ads and try the cheaper alternatives? You'll save money, and you might find a drink you enjoy just as much.

Myth 2: Caffeine makes cola taste better

All the drinks tasted contain caffeine. Soft drink manufacturers claim it has a distinctive taste that heightens the flavour, but recently published research suggests this is untrue: expert tasters were unable to distinguish between caffeine-free Coca-Cola and the

Sweetness and lite

The diet colas in our test contain no sugar but they're sweetened with artificial sweeteners. Drinks usually contain at least two sweeteners, because manufacturers have found that combinations give a quality of sweetness that's more like sugar than any one sweetener on its own. You can identify the sweeteners from the code numbers on the label:

- Acesulfame potassium (950).
- Aspartame (951).
- Cyclamate (952).
- Saccharin (954).
- Sucralose (955).

These substances can be many hundreds of times sweeter than sugar so the amounts you get in your drink are very small. But are they safe?

There have been reports linking many of these artificial sweeteners to increased risk of cancer. In the 1970s several studies of rats fed very large amounts of saccharin raised concerns about its safety, and as a result it was banned in Canada and until 1996 products containing saccharin in the USA had to be labelled with a warning.

It was much the same with cyclamate. A study found that it increased the risk of bladder cancer in rats and as a result its use was banned in Canada and the USA, and in the UK it was banned until 1996. And aspartame has been linked to a variety of health

problems ranging from Gulf War Syndrome to increased risk of brain and breast cancers.

But most of these claims for the various sweeteners have failed to stand up conclusively to rigorous scientific examination. Last year, for example, a European report claimed aspartame causes a number of different cancers, whereas an independent panel of experts looking at the same research results found no compelling evidence for aspartame being harmful at the levels permitted in foods and drinks.

With these controversies widely reported in the media it's not surprising that a quarter of adult Australians now believe artificial sweeteners cause cancer. Experts, though, are generally convinced that any risks are small. And you have to balance these small risks against the very substantial risks to your health from being overweight.

As long as there's no absolute certainty, experts recommend we limit our intake of artificially sweetened foods and drinks. Recent surveys have found that some consumers (mainly children) are now exceeding the acceptable daily intake (ADI) for cyclamate. The ADI is the 'safe' level recommended by scientific experts; there's a substantial safety margin and consuming more than the ADI over a short period isn't necessarily a health risk, but on a regular basis there might be cause for concern.

same drink spiked with caffeine at the level usually added to cola drinks. This suggests adding caffeine could have more to do with its mildly addictive properties than its taste.

Myth 3: Diet colas help you lose weight

A can of regular Coca-Cola contains about eight teaspoons of sugar and gives you 675 flab-forming kilojoules. If you drink a can of diet cola instead you'll get less than 10 kJ. So it's not surprising some studies have shown people lose weight if they substitute diet soft drinks for sugary ones.

But there's a catch. Evidence is emerging that even artificially sweetened drinks can stimulate your appetite; they can give you more of a craving for sweet foods and so contribute indirectly to you putting on weight.

You're more likely to lose weight if you avoid these drinks altogether — maybe drink water, or get your caffeine fix from a cup of coffee.

Myth 4: Diet cola drinks are safe for teeth

Diet colas don't contain sugars that cause tooth decay but they contain phosphoric acid (and sometimes citric acid as well). These acids can cause erosion in teeth, a condition where enamel is dissolved from tooth surfaces. It's different from decay, but can be just as bad for your teeth. ■

"Contains phenylalanine"

You'll see this warning on any product sweetened with aspartame. When aspartame breaks down in the body, one of the products is the amino acid phenylalanine. This is a health hazard for people born with the rare hereditary disease phenylketonuria (PKU). Their bodies have a problem breaking down phenylalanine, so it builds up in the blood to levels that can cause brain damage. To prevent this from happening they have to limit their intake of phenylalanine from all sources, including common protein foods such as meat and milk.

FLUKY!

Some artificial sweeteners were discovered by chance — or sloppy laboratory practices. Ira Remsen, one of the discoverers of saccharin (in 1879), was working on the chemistry of compounds made from coal tar, but noticed a sweet taste after not thoroughly washing his hands before dinner. And Michael Sveda was developing an anti-fever drug when he discovered cyclamate. He was a smoker and noticed a sweet taste after momentarily putting his cigarette down on the lab bench.

No longer science fiction ...

Animal cloning is a now a reality, and so the implications for its place in the food chain are being considered by our regulators. Animal cloning refers to the breeding of animals by replacing the genetic material in an egg with the genome (the complete genetic material) from the animal to be cloned. This produces genetic duplicates of the original animal.

Currently, cloning in Australia is restricted to small numbers of mostly cattle and sheep and, under a voluntary agreement, they don't enter the food chain. In the future, though, offspring of these cloned animals are likely to end up on your dinner plate.

The US Food and Drug Administration recently released its draft risk assessment of the safety of food derived from cloned animals. It concluded that, scientifically, clones should be indential to the parent, but it's yet to be validated experimentally. Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) is continuing to review the information, and will be assessing the food safety evidence in the FDA draft risk assessment report.



CYNTHIA AGE

BETTER PROTECTION AGAINST MISLEADING CLAIMS

Standards Australia has released a new Australian standard for measuring the glycaemic index (GI) of food. The standard, set to be adopted around the world, will assist in ensuring claims made on products are more accurate, and that consumers are better protected against false or misleading GI claims. For more information on GI, go to choice.com.au and search for 'glycaemic index'.

A new standard for organic food is also in the pipeline. It's another area where consumers can easily be misled, and there are currently quite a few organisations providing organic accreditation.

Any standard or measures put in place to provide greater certainty for consumers are welcomed by CHOICE.

Carob vs chocolate

Easter is upon us, and if you're one of the few people who've kept to their New Year's resolution to eat more healthily, you could be thinking of choosing carob over chocolate. Unfortunately, though, carob can contain as much fat and as many kilojoules as regular chocolate — check the nutrition panels for comparison. The one difference between carob and chocolate is the absence of caffeine, so if you're avoiding caffeine, stick to the carob.



GENE ROOS



Pawning your home?

A reverse mortgage on your home can increase your standard of living in retirement but don't sign a contract that could put you in danger of losing your home.

A reverse mortgage allows older home owners to borrow money against the value of their home, to do some urgently needed renovations, for example, or to give them an income beyond their pension.

The loan is repaid when you sell the home, move into long-term aged care or die. Interest and fees are added to the loan and its amount increases quickly. This affects your later options (such as whether you'll be able to afford to move into aged care) and any inheritance you might leave your children.

A reverse mortgage is designed to stay with you for the rest of your life, or close to it, so you need to know exactly what you're getting into. The loan contract should be in plain English, be crystal-clear and contain fair and reasonable conditions that don't place you under excessive risk.

CHOICE has assessed the contracts for 23 reverse mortgages against six standards for consumer protection. Under the six headings that follow we've explained what those standards are.

None of the loans meets all our standards. Ten contracts meet the five that we consider to be minimum contract standards. However, our first consumer

protection standard looks at conditions under which the lender can sell your home against your will and therefore is vitally important. None of the loan contracts meets this good practice standard for protecting borrowers from the forced sale of their home.

1 Default for major contract breaches only

If at any time you breach the so-called 'default conditions' of the loan the lender can charge enforcement expenses, which could include a higher interest rate. They could even ask for repayment of the loan and sell your home if you can't raise the money any other way — a devastating experience.

All the contracts we've looked at include unfairly broad default clauses. They all include conditions such as your being in default if you:

- "Do something you have agreed not to do, or do not do something you have agreed to do", or
- "You or the Guarantor breach any term of this loan contract, the guarantee, any mortgage or any insurance policy that we require."

Wording like this is a very serious trap. Contracts that include such broad, unspecified default conditions put you in danger of losing your home. >

IN A NUTSHELL

- Good consumer protection is essential in a reverse mortgage contract, but many of the contracts CHOICE assessed fall short.
- Ten out of 23 loans meet CHOICE's minimum contract standards but none gives borrowers total protection against forcibly losing their home.

< Many companies told us they have procedures in place to avoid or quickly resolve defaults. But reverse mortgage borrowers are financially vulnerable, especially a few years into the mortgage. At that time most wouldn't be able to repay the loan without selling their home. If they're considered to be in default — and that can happen for minor things like not paying council rates on time — they can lose their home.

So 'procedures' aren't enough protection. CHOICE has designed a good practice standard for default conditions in reverse mortgage contracts:

- You must only be considered in default for major breaches of the contract, such as doing something that severely reduces the value of your home — for example, pulling down the garage.
- Minor breaches such as not paying your rates or filling out an annual statement mustn't be a cause for default.
- The contract must clearly and specifically spell out what's required of you and in which situations you would be in default — no catch-all phrases.

2 Unconditional negative equity guarantee

Next to the default clause, the 'no negative equity guarantee' is the most important one in the contract. It means the lender will cover the shortfall if the loan balance exceeds the value of your home when it's sold.

In a 2006 assessment of reverse mortgage contracts we found limitations to consumer protection in most no negative equity guarantees.

Things have improved a bit: 10 companies now meet our minimum standards, as they honour the guarantee even when the borrower is in default and don't put any condition on the no negative equity guarantee: ABN AMRO, BANK SA, BLUESTONE, HOME BUILDING SOCIETY, INTEGRIS, MARINER, POLICE & NURSES/ NURSES FIRST, SGE, ST GEORGE and VISION EQUITY LIVING. (There can be one reasonable exception to this unconditional guarantee: if the borrower is guilty of fraud or misrepresentation in signing the contract.)

Some other companies have made changes in the right direction but still may not honour the guarantee if you're in default. From the consumer protection viewpoint, this isn't good enough: all other companies need to amend their contracts to include an unconditional no negative equity guarantee, and we don't recommend you enter into a contract with a company that doesn't offer one.

3 Loan term not fixed

A reverse mortgage shouldn't have a fixed term: it should only end when you sell, move into long-term aged care or die.

Only one company, TRANSCOMM, has a fixed loan term that ends when the youngest borrower turns 85. TRANSCOMM told us the borrower can extend the mortgage at the end of the fixed term, but it's hardly satisfactory for them to be having to renegotiate terms at the age of 85.

4 Repayment can't be requested

Partial loan repayments should never be requested during the loan term. One company, HOMESTART, can require repayments if the loan amount reaches more than 50% of the value of the home. HOMESTART says repayments are set at a maximum of 21% of the borrower's income and it hasn't yet requested repayments from any customer.

5 Legal advice is mandatory

It should be a requirement that the borrower gets independent legal advice before entering into the contract. Two companies, HOMESTART and TRANSCOMM, don't have this condition. In the last issue of CHOICE we reported on our shadow shop of reverse mortgage salespeople, which uncovered several less than straightforward sales practices and showed why independent legal advice is essential (see March 2007, page 12).



Three weeks in India

Nigel (not his real name), 70, from Queensland is a success story in the reverse mortgage stakes. When he took out a reverse mortgage in early 2006, he considered all the implications carefully. Most importantly, he made sure he went with a provider offering a no negative equity guarantee.

And he's single: "I only have one nephew so I didn't have any children to think of down the track."

Nigel is on the age pension and uses the money as an emergency fund and to travel. "What I love the most to do is travelling. I've just come back from three weeks in India and will go to Italy next year," he says.

"Reverse mortgages aren't for everyone, but for unattached people with few or no commitments they can completely change your lifestyle for the better."

6 Dispute resolution scheme available

Both the lender and the company managing the mortgage (if different) should participate in an ASIC-approved external dispute resolution scheme.

All the companies now fulfil this essential consumer protection standard, but there was an unclear situation with one of the lenders. PERPETUAL LIMITED is the lender for AUSTRAL CU, COLLINS, MACQUARIE, RESI and ROYAL GUARDIAN. At the time of our research PERPETUAL only participated in the Credit Ombudsman Service though one of its daughter companies. In our opinion this created an uncertain situation for its borrowers. As a result of our enquiries, it's now become a member of the scheme in its own right.

Most companies scored well for the last four essential consumer protection standards.

Loan features

Our evaluation of available reverse mortgages only considered the contract conditions, but of course loans also differ in interest rates, fees and other features. They're listed in the table on pages 16–17 along with the contract conditions.

- **Interest rates** Variable interest rates ranged from 8.1% to 9.1%. BLUESTONE and INTEGRIS also offer a capped variable rate that can never go above 9.89%.

About half the companies also have fixed interest rates available, ranging from one year to the life of the loan. Fixed rates give you security, but if you ever want to pay out the loan before the end of the fixed period you may have to pay expensive 'break' costs. Check that the company won't charge break costs if you need to move into long-term aged care or if you die.

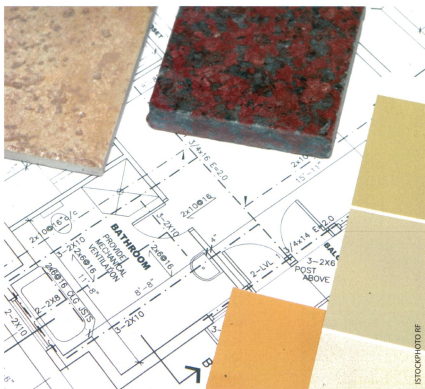
Tip BLUESTONE and INTEGRIS offer a discount of up to 0.4% on the interest rate if the broker who sells you the loan forgoes their ongoing commission.

- **Fees** Setup fees range from zero to \$1585, including valuation and the lender's legal costs. Annual fees range from zero up to \$180. You'll also have to pay for regular valuations.

Exit fees are charged for early repayment (usually within the first five years). They range up to 2% of the loan amount.

- **Payment options** Usually you can get a lump sum, a regular payment, flexible drawdown or a combination. Some companies also offer a cash reserve facility, where you can store extra funds without paying interest if you don't use them.

The big thing is not to borrow more than you really need: the more you spend, the less will be left when the house is sold. In our shadow shop we found some brokers and salespeople who advised consumers to take the maximum available loan. This advice may not have your interests at heart, as the broker's/salesperson's commission is a percentage of the amount you borrow.



PRODUCT		GOOD PRACTICE STANDARD	CHOICE'S FIVE MINIMUM CONTRACT STANDARDS		
		Default for major contract breaches only	Unconditional no negative equity guarantee	Loan term not fixed	Repayments can't
Company (in alphabetical order within groups)		Available all states / territories?			
MINIMUM CONTRACT STANDARDS MET					
ABN AMRO Home Equity Access	✓	X	✓	✓	✓
Bank SA Seniors Access / Plus	SA, NT	X	✓	✓	✓
Bluestone Equity Release Equitytap	✓	X	✓	✓	✓
Home Building Society Reverse Equity Loan	WA only	X	✓	✓	✓
Integris Equity Release Equitytap (A)	✓	X	✓	✓	✓
Mariner Retirement Solutions Equity Access	✓	X	✓	✓	✓
Police & Nurses / Nurses First Credit Society Easy Living Access	Vic, WA, major cities	X	✓	✓	✓
SGE CU Retiree Access	✓	X	✓	✓	✓
St George Seniors Access / Plus	Not in SA, NT	X	✓	✓	✓
Vision Equity Living Equity Release	✓	X	✓	✓	✓
NOT GOOD ENOUGH					
Austral CU Reverse Mortgage	✓	X	(B)	✓	✓
Australian Seniors Finance Lifetime Loan	✓	X	(C)	✓	✓
BankWest Seniors Equity Release	✓	X	(D)	✓	✓
Collins Securities Lifestyle Plus	✓	X	(B)	✓	✓
CBA Equity Unlock Loan for Seniors	✓	X		✓	✓
Lifepian Australia Building Society Lifestyle Loan for Seniors	Not in ACT, NT, Tas	X		✓	✓
Macquarie Mortgages Silver Living	✓	X	(B)	✓	✓
Mortgagehouse Seniors Home Equity Release	✓	X		✓	✓
Over Fifty Group Seniors Home Equity Release	✓	X		✓	✓
RESI Seniors Equity Advantage	Not in NT	X	(B)	✓	✓
Royal Guardian Mortgage Royal Golden Years	✓	X	(B)	✓	✓
POOR					
HomeStart Finance Seniors Equity Loan	SA only	X		✓	
Transcomm CU Annuity Plus Reverse Mortgage / Options	Not in NT	X			✓

USING THE TABLE

We assessed the contracts of 23 reverse mortgages against five minimum contract standards and a separate good practice standard. See pages 13–15 for more on them.

Good practice standard

To meet the CHOICE good practice contract standard, defaults must be limited to appropriate major contract breaches only:

- Minor breaches must not be a cause for default.
- The contract must clearly and specifically spell out what's required of you and in which situations you would be in default — no catch-all phrases.

No company met the good practice standard.

Ratings

- **Minimum contract standards met** All five minimum standards met.

- **Not good enough** Four minimum standards met.
- **Poor** Only two minimum standards met.

Minimum contract standards are:

- No conditions (other than fraud or misrepresentation) are placed on the no negative equity guarantee. This means it applies even when the borrower is in default of the contract.
- No fixed loan term — the loan term ends only in case of death, moving into long-term aged care or sale.
- Partial repayments can't be required during the loan term.
- The borrower must get independent legal advice.
- The mortgage management company and the lender (if different) participate in an ASIC-approved external dispute resolution scheme.

See *Loan features* on page 15 for an explanation of the costs and conditions. LVR is loan-to-value ratio.

		COSTS AND CONDITIONS											CONTACT	
mandatory	Dispute resolution scheme	Variable rate (%)	Lifetime fixed rate (%)	Other fixed terms available?	Setup costs (\$)	Annual fee (\$)	No exit fee	LVR for age 60 (%)	LVR for age 70 (%)	LVR for age 80 (%)	Protection of % of value available	Combination of lump sum and regular payment available	Time to repay after death (months)	Contact
	✓	8.20	8.45	✓	0	0		15	25	35	✓	✓	12	homeequityaccess.com.au
	✓	9.07			850	120-180	✓	na	20	20-25		(G)	ns	banksa.com.au
	✓	8.59-8.74 (E)	8.39-8.59 (F)	✓	0-1045	0		15-21	20-35	36-45	✓	✓	6+	bluestoneequityrelease.com.au
	✓	8.57			814	80	✓	na	15	20			6	homeonline.com.au
	✓	8.59-8.74 (E)	8.39-8.59 (F)	✓	0-1045	0		15-21	20-35	36-45	✓	✓	6+	02 8299 9000
	✓	8.30	8.50	✓	1050	0		15	25	35	✓	✓	12	marinerretirement.com.au
	✓	8.56			850	80	✓	15	25	35			(H)	pncs.com.au
	✓	9.05			1090	0	✓	15	25	30			ns	sgecu.com.au
	✓	9.07			850	120-180	✓	na	20	20-25		(G)	ns	stgeorge.com.au
	✓	8.15	8.30	✓	1245	0		15	25	35	✓	✓	12	visionequityliving.com.au
	✓	8.75	8.35	✓	615	0		15	25	35	✓	✓	6	australcu.com.au
	✓	8.80		✓	990-1585	0	✓	15	25	37.5	✓	✓	12+	seniorsfinance.com.au
	✓	8.47			700	0	✓	na	25	25			6	bankwest.com.au
	✓	8.75	8.35	✓	899	0		15	25	35	✓	✓	6	collins-securities.com.au
	✓	9.07			950-1050	144	✓	na	25	40		✓	ns	commbank.com.au
	✓	8.54			600	120	✓	na	20	30		✓	6	lifeplan.com.au
	✓	8.87	8.40	✓	650	0		15	25	35	✓	✓	6	macquarie.com.au
	✓	8.25	8.40	✓	799	0	✓	15	25	35	✓	✓	10	mortgagehouse.com.au
	✓	8.25	8.40	✓	799	0	✓	15	25	35	✓	✓	10	overfifty.com.au
	✓	8.85		✓	616	0		15	25	35	✓	✓	6	resi.com.au
	✓	8.84	8.50	✓	1205	0		15	25	35	✓	✓	6	royalguardian.com.au
	✓	8.22			945-1145	0	✓	15	25	30	✓	✓	1	homestart.com.au
	✓	8.10			750-1100	96	✓	12	19	31		(G)	ns	transcomm.com.au

CU Credit union.

na Not available.

ns Not specified.

(A) Integrus Equity Release is issued by Bluestone and offered by a range of credit unions including

Discovery CU, Encompass CU, Holiday Coast CU and Sydney CU.

(B) This company has two types of default. The no negative equity guarantee applies if there are 'minor' defaults but not for 'material' defaults. However, material defaults include failing to pay your rates.

(C) No unconditional guarantee, but if the lender decides the borrower acted reasonably the borrower may only be charged for costs caused by default (such as a difference in sale price caused by repairs that weren't done).

(D) No unconditional guarantee, but the no negative equity guarantee will apply if the default hasn't caused a reduction in the value of the home.

(E) Higher rate if loan paid in instalments, lower rate for a lump sum, interest rate capped at 9.89%; rates can be discounted by up to 0.4% if the broker forgoes their ongoing commission.

(F) Higher rate if loan paid in instalments, lower rate for a lump sum, rates can be discounted by up to 0.40% if the broker forgoes their ongoing commission.

(G) Two loan options are available: a lump sum only payment, or a combination of lump sum and regular payments.

(H) 30 days to negotiate an agreement about the timeframe.



With winter approaching it's time
to get your annual flu shot.

Dreaded lurgie

IN A NUTSHELL

- The influenza virus is constantly changing so you need to get a flu shot every year to be protected against the most common strains.
- People like doctors, nurses, day-care staff and nursing home staff, who are in contact with those in the at-risk groups, should also be vaccinated to stop the spread of the virus.

No one enjoys being laid low with the flu, but for some people it can lead to far more serious consequences than a few miserable days in bed. Getting an annual flu shot is the single most important and effective measure in preventing the illness, but in 2004, only 42% of Australians under 65 who were at risk of developing life-threatening complications from flu were vaccinated (see *Who should be vaccinated?*, far right). In an average year it's estimated that 1500 Australians die and 20,000 to 40,000 are hospitalised as a result of the flu.

It's recommended that you get your flu shot in March or April. The protection develops two weeks after getting the injection and lasts up to a year.

What is it?

Flu is caused by the influenza virus, which infects the respiratory tract (nose, throat and lungs). Two types of the influenza virus cause illness in humans — influenza A and influenza B. However, influenza A viruses are the main cause of global epidemics, such as the 'Spanish flu' outbreak in 1918, which caused at least 20 million deaths worldwide. The 'bird flu' virus is also a subtype of the influenza A virus.

More than a cold

Some people use the terms 'flu' and 'cold' interchangeably, but the flu has more severe symptoms. These can include high fever, headache, extreme tiredness, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle aches and weakness, and in some cases (particularly in children) stomach symptoms such as nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea.

The main differences between the flu and a common cold are:

- Colds cause a runny nose, while the flu usually starts with a dry feeling in the nose and throat.
- Cold symptoms usually only last a few days while the flu can last up to a week.
- The flu causes a higher fever.
- Muscle pains and shivering attacks occur more commonly with the flu.

How is it spread?

The influenza virus is easily passed from person to person through droplets from coughs and sneezes. It's estimated that droplets can carry up to 90 cm through the air and fall on the nose or mouth

of another person. The virus can also be passed on by touching an infected surface. So if someone with the virus coughs into their hands and then touches something, you could catch the virus by touching the same object and then touching your mouth or nose.

Generally, people who have the virus will be able to infect others from one day prior to feeling ill until five days after they first develop symptoms. Young children and people with weakened immune systems may be contagious for longer.

Children aged between five and nine have the highest rates of infection and the virus tends to spread quickly through day-care centres and schools.

You can help to control the spread of the illness by:

- Staying at home and keeping your children at home if they're infected.
- Washing your hands in soap and running water for 10 seconds after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose.
- Covering your coughs and sneezes with a tissue and disposing of it in the garbage after use.
- Getting vaccinated.

Treatment

If you get the flu you should try to stay in bed, preferably until your temperature returns to normal.

Drink plenty of fluids (but no alcohol) and you may want to take paracetamol or aspirin to help relieve fever, headaches and muscle pain. Prescription medications, such as oseltamivir (Tamiflu) and zanamivir (Relenza), can reduce the severity and duration of the illness if taken within two days of the first symptoms.

The vaccine

The most effective way to avoid getting the flu is to get your annual flu shot. The World Health Organization (WHO) continually monitors changes in the influenza viruses in order to determine which strains to create vaccines against each year. WHO has 100 national influenza centres worldwide and four collaborating centres (including one in Melbourne), which analyse viruses from around the world.

WHO convenes two meetings each year, in February and September, to review the findings of the centres and recommend which vaccine formulations should be used in the northern and southern hemispheres respectively.

The vaccines currently used in most parts of the world are taken from an influenza virus that has been grown in embryonic hens' eggs, highly purified and then killed. The vaccine also contains salt water and trace amounts of an antibiotic. A preservative known as Thimerosal, which contains mercury and used to be included in influenza vaccines, has now been removed.

The vaccine is injected into the shoulder, or the thigh for children between six and 12 months. As the influenza virus components in the vaccine have been killed, you won't get the flu as a result of having a flu shot, but some people experience some mild flu-like symptoms for a day or so afterwards.

Who should be vaccinated?

Anyone who wants to avoid getting the flu should get a flu shot, but it's especially recommended for:

- All adults aged 65 and over.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders aged 50 and over, because of their greatly increased risk of premature death from respiratory disease.
- People older than six months who have diabetes, cancer, asthma, chronic respiratory disorders or chronic heart, kidney or metabolic disorders.
- People with a suppressed immune system due to infections such as HIV, or patients on immune-suppressing drugs for diseases like rheumatoid arthritis or following an organ transplant.
- Public hospital outpatients and inpatients who are considered to be at high risk for complications of influenza.
- Residents of nursing homes, hostels and other chronic-care facilities.

- Children with cyanotic congenital heart disease.
- Healthcare workers.
- Family members caring for elderly people and/or people with chronic health conditions listed above.
- Children on long-term aspirin therapy.
- Pregnant women who will be in their second or third trimester of pregnancy between June and October, as they're likely to suffer more severe infections. The vaccine is considered safe for pregnant women and also provides protection for newborn babies during their first vulnerable months of life.

You shouldn't get a flu shot if:

- You have a severe allergy to eggs, because the virus used in the vaccine is grown in hens' eggs.
- You're already ill with a fever — wait until your symptoms subside before being vaccinated.
- If you've previously suffered from Guillain-Barre syndrome (GBS) you should discuss vaccination with your doctor. In the 1990s studies found an association between the vaccine and GBS in the northern hemisphere, at a rate of roughly one to two cases of GBS per million vaccinated.
- Babies under six months of age shouldn't be given a flu vaccine.

Benefits

In healthy people, the flu vaccine provides around 70%–90% protection against infection for about one year, but it won't prevent you from catching a common cold.

Research has shown that people aged over 65 benefit greatly from flu vaccination. People in this age group are the most likely to suffer complications from flu, such as pneumonia, worsening of pre-existing conditions or even death. A WHO study found that flu vaccination can reduce hospitalisation by about 50% among nursing home residents and reduce the risk of pneumonia by about 60%. For elderly people not living in nursing homes, vaccination can reduce overall mortality by 39%–75% during flu season.

In 2004, four out of five Australians aged over 65 were vaccinated against flu. An even greater benefit can be achieved when people 65 and over combine their influenza vaccine with the pneumococcal vaccine, which protects against pneumonia, otitis media, pneumonic meningitis and septicaemia.

How much does it cost?

- The vaccine is provided free for people aged 65 or older, and to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders aged 50 or older, or 15–49 for those with a chronic illness.
- If you're not eligible for a concession, the vaccine costs around \$20, depending on your pharmacy.
- If you're entitled to a concession, or you've already reached your PBS safety net limit of \$1059, the vaccine costs \$4.90. ■

NEEDLE-FREE VACCINE

The Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine (LAIV) is a relatively new vaccine that has been introduced in some countries, including the USA and Russia. It contains living influenza virus particles that have been weakened so they won't cause the flu, rather than the killed viruses used in other vaccines. It's administered by a nasal spray rather than a needle. It has proven to be successful, but in the US it's only recommended for healthy people aged between five and 49 because of limited safety data. However, this vaccine won't be available in Australia for at least two or three years.

DOCTOR ENDORSEMENTS BANNED

The Federal Government has taken action to stop doctors and other health professionals giving their endorsement to non-prescription medicines and medical devices.

In 2005 the Therapeutic Goods Advertising Code was amended to allow these endorsements in advertising, but concern by groups such as the Australian Medical Association has prompted the government to put in place a ban on new ads. However, ad campaigns that have already been approved can continue to run for two years.

Christopher Pyne, the Assistant Minister for Health and Ageing, said, "It is entirely inappropriate for healthcare professionals to be lending their support to health products. This could lead to consumers thinking these products are superior to similar medicines on the market."

CHOICE supports the government's move to stop doctors endorsing products. Therapeutic goods aren't like shoes or sportswear and shouldn't be endorsed by celebrity doctors, other health professionals or, in CHOICE's view, sports or movie stars.



COMBIS

Natural therapies by appointment to ... Brad, Jen and Catherine

Two eminent UK-based experts on herbal and alternative medicine have been checking out media reports on the lifestyles of the rich and famous.

They've come to the conclusion that the popularity of some alternative therapies may be at least partially explained by people wanting to be more like the celebs they most admire. We may never have Catherine Zeta-Jones's money, looks or celebrity, but we can have her homeopathy.

The authors note that no-one seems to care if, for example, Gwyneth Paltrow uses any pharmacy-bought medicines for common ailments, but her reported interest in acupuncture, cupping and herbal treatments could be front-page news in some magazines.

They identified 38 celebs who were reported to use alternative therapies — everyone from the Queen to Madonna, via Olivia Newton-John and Arnold Schwarzenegger. The most popular treatment favoured by the celebs was homeopathy, followed by acupuncture and Ayurveda (a traditional therapy system from India).

Some therapies — like Klamath Lake algae (Demi Moore's reported fave; a type of blue-green algae trumpeted as a super food) — are so avant garde the experts had never heard of them. But one notable omission they found is chiropractic — it's apparently not currently cutting-edge enough to rate a mention in celebrity land.

Travelling OS?

Passport, money, tickets, toothbrush? Enough of your usual medication to last while you're away? There may be some other things you also need to organise before you go.

According to Medicare, it's illegal to take PBS-subsidised medicines out of Australia unless they're for your personal use or for someone travelling with you. The fine for doing otherwise can be as much as \$5000 (and maybe a jail term).

To be on the safe side, here's what the government advises doing before you go:

- Get your doctor to write a letter explaining your meds are for personal use, and advising what they are and how much you're taking.
- Check with the embassy of the country you're going to that the medicines are legal there.
- Leave your medicines in their original packaging.



GENE ROSS

It's hard to find a 'green' washing powder that gets your clothes clean too.

Clean and green?

test

45 LAUNDRY DETERGENTS

On test were 45 laundry powder concentrates — 14 for front loaders and 31 for top loaders (of which many were also suitable for front loaders). We chose concentrates over ordinary powders and liquids because in previous tests they've generally given a better wash.

As well as testing how clean they washed, we also had them analysed for chemical components and pH because many people now want to use the 'greywater' from their washing machine for watering their lawn or garden (see *Best for your garden*, page 23, for the results).

We've made a couple of other changes to the way we test detergents. We now use cold water instead of warm because that's what most people use. That's changed the performance of some powders compared with previous tests. DUO, for example, previously featured in our Best Buy list when tested in warm water, but its latest formulation slipped well down the rankings in cold water.

Most of the products with enzymes again tended to wash better than those without, despite the change to cold water. In the past the enzymes used were designed for optimal action in warm water, but some manufacturers are now shifting to a 'cocktail' of enzymes: it's likely some of these are better in cold water, some in warm.

Dirt and stains

Along with the wash swatches that test the general detergent effectiveness (they're stained with oil, milk and a pigment), this time we also included tests for common types of stains, based on a reader survey conducted last year. You told us that dirt/mud, cooking oil, tomato and grass stains were among the most common in the wash, so we included some swatches with special stains too — see *How we tested*, page 25, for details.

The results for these specific stains showed that, with some exceptions, if a washing powder gets a reasonable score for general dirt removal, it's also not bad at removing stains. If you often get a particular type of stain on your washing, check out the top-scoring detergents that also get a tick for that kind of stain.

Good value

If you hate spending a fortune on washing powder, the good news is that WOOLWORTHS' and COLES' new own-brands washed well — some WOOLWORTHS Select and YOU'LL LOVE COLES powders were among the top performers. And if there's an Aldi store near you, consider its TRIMAT — it was the cheapest per wash among all our top performers and scored equal best for both front and top loaders. (Aldi currently has stores in the ACT, NSW, Queensland and Victoria.) >

IN A NUTSHELL

- TRIMAT from Aldi was equal best for top and front loaders, and by far the cheapest of the top performers. Woolworths' and Coles' new own-brands did well too.
- If you're planning to use greywater from your washing machine on your garden, you may find you have to compromise on wash performance — most powders that wash well would be bad for your plants.



WHAT TO BUY

For top loader machines

	Cents per wash
OMO High Performance Now with Staizyme	58
TRIMAT Advanced Stain Removing Formula (Aldi)	BEST BUY 27
DRIVE Advanced Enzyme Power	65
YOU'LL LOVE COLES Cold Active Triple Enzyme	42
COLD POWER Advanced	54
DYNAMO New Advanced Formula	57

For front loader machines

	Cents per wash
Top loader detergents also suitable for front loaders	
TRIMAT Advanced Stain Removing Formula (Aldi)	BEST BUY 14
RADIANT Power 100% Active Enzyme Boosted	28
RADIANT Power Cold Enzyme Boosted	26

Front loader only detergents

	Cents per wash
OMO Matic Superior	49
DRIVE Matic Advanced Enzyme Power	63
YOU'LL LOVE COLES Matic Advance	45
WOOLWORTHS Select Front Loader	BEST BUY 37



Some top loader detergents are also suitable for front loaders, so we tested the top-performing detergents from that group in front loaders as well — three of them are recommended. In particular, the Best Buy TRIMAT rated comparatively well at a front loader dose, and at that usage level could be suitable for greywater use if you have a large area to water and clay (rather than sandy) soil.

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

We're concerned that some products whose names imply they're environmentally friendly could in fact cause problems if used on your garden. For example, Planet Ark is too high in sodium, as is Aware Garden Safe in its top-loader dose.

Reduce, reuse, recycle

Greywater is the waste water from showers, baths, spas, handbasins, laundry tubs, washing machines, dishwashers and kitchen sinks. It doesn't include water from toilets — that's called black water. With water restrictions in many areas, using greywater on your garden could help save hundreds of litres of water a day.

Washing machines account for almost a quarter of household wastewater or, depending on your machine, about 60–180 litres per wash. So wouldn't it be great if you could use washing machine water on your garden or lawn, instead of sending it down the drain? Yes, but unfortunately it contains quite a few chemicals that aren't good for plants or soil — and if the concentration or total load of these is too high, you'll end up harming your plants and wrecking the soil.

We had a lab that specialises in soil, water and wastewater analysis test all the detergents at the concentrations recommended by manufacturers for front and/or top loader machines, as appropriate. The components most likely to cause problems are phosphorus, salinity, sodium and pH.

Only the wash water from one wash was tested, so while the results are valid comparatively, they don't represent the total of what you'd end up putting on your garden if you interspersed wash water with 'clean water', other sources of greywater and/or also used the machine's rinse water. We've also assumed the greywater is untreated — that is, you're diverting it from the washing machine to the garden without any filtering, chemical treatment or disinfection processes. Our recommendations (see *Best for your garden*, right) are based on using the untreated wash water intermittently, interspersed with rinse water, other greywater or clean water, and over the long term.

The size of your garden also matters: the lab we used wouldn't recommend using untreated wash water at all on areas less than 150–200 m². And two of the detergents we've listed as suitable for greywater use (TRIMAT and LAUNDRITE) have higher phosphorus levels and aren't recommended unless you have clay soil and are watering an area over 300 m².

What you need to know about greywater

What's your soil?

If you don't know what type of soil you have, this quick test will give you an idea.

Take a handful of soil, add a little water and make it into a ball.

- Loam soil will form a moist ball with an earthy smell. It's usually brown, and holds and drains water well.
- Clay soil forms a hard, smooth ball. Its fine, dense particles inhibit water movement, and when it dries it resists water. Its colour can range from white to red to dark brown.
- Sandy soil is soft and crumbles easily — it probably won't form a good ball. It's light in colour, has little or no smell and is low in nutrients and organic matter.

Using greywater

Greywater can be stored and used on the garden (or even in toilets or washing machines), or else it can be diverted to the garden with a plumbed-in diverter (with a switch so that if it's raining, it goes into the sewer instead). Conditions may apply in the area where you live: contact your local council for advice on options available.

- DIY options include attaching an extra-long flexible hose from the washing machine to the garden or using a bucket.
- Don't store untreated greywater for more than 24 hours: if you can't use it (because it's raining, say) don't keep it.

- If it's untreated, limit usage to water from the shower, bath and washing machine (preferably rinse water). Kitchen water contains fats and solids that might damage soil and plants.
- If someone in your family is sick with gastro or flu or another contagious disease, stop using the greywater.
- Don't water herbs or vegetables.
- Keep the greywater underground, or under mulch — this helps prevent evaporation, as well as keeping it away from kids and pets.

Specifically for washing machine water...

- We tested only the wash water for chemicals that could harm your garden. What comes out of your machine may also include dirt and bacteria and viruses from the dirty clothes.
- If you collect the wash and rinse water before dispersing it, the contaminants will be diluted and you can spread them further. However, the criteria we used considered the total load of problem chemicals that will accumulate in your garden over time, not just their concentration when you first put them on, so the recommended irrigation area still applies. Potential impacts are very much dose-dependent — you could try reducing the amount of detergent you use, providing it still gets your clothes acceptably clean.
- The larger the irrigation area, the more you'll spread the chemical load. Don't use greywater to water pot plants.

Results

Phosphorus

Small amounts of phosphorus can be useful for plants, and it's a major component of fertiliser. When it gets into waterways, however, it can cause excessive algal growth, leading to toxic algal blooms.

The effect on your soil is varied, though. We've recommended (see *Best for your garden*, below right) that some detergents with higher levels of phosphorus only be used on clay soils, because the phosphorus binds to clay minerals and doesn't leach away. On sandy soils, excess phosphorus can leach into groundwater. Australian soils are typically low in phosphorus, and some native species can't tolerate high levels.

Many (but by no means all) municipal sewage treatment systems can chemically remove phosphorus from wastewater before it's discharged. So even if you're not putting your washing machine water on the garden and it's going into the sewage instead, using lower-phosphorus products helps reduce the need for these chemicals, and to reduce the outflow of phosphorus in untreated effluent. In this case look for products labelled 'NP' — it means low or no phosphorus — or the table listed under 'Low or no phosphorus' in the table, overleaf.

Salinity/sodium

All laundry detergents contain salts, typically sodium salts such as sodium nitrate, sodium sulphate, sodium phosphate and sodium silicate. (Table salt — sodium chloride — isn't used in detergents.)

Salinity can be determined by measuring the electrical conductivity of the solution (in deciSiemens per metre, or dS/m). All laundry detergents are highly saline, and frequent long-term use would likely harm your garden, unless it was spread over a large area.

The sodium in the salts harms not only plants, but soils. It affects the soil's permeability and causes a loss of structural stability. Manufacturers could use potassium salts instead of sodium, but they're slightly more expensive.

pH/total alkalinity

Laundry detergents are highly alkaline (that is, have a high pH): a pH higher than 10 helps dissolve organic dirt, such as grease, oils and food scraps. All but two of the detergents tested have a pH greater than 10, and the two exceptions are still higher than 9.5. Most biological systems prefer a pH between 6 and 9, and greywater with a high pH is likely to harm many plants and soil organisms.

Laundry detergents contain chemical 'buffers' to help prevent pH changes in the solution, thereby maintaining optimal pH level. A measure of total alkalinity tells us

that many are very highly buffered, so would require enormous amounts of acid to counter the alkalinity. If you put this water onto soil, the pH of the soil would be more likely to change than that of the greywater.

Environmentally friendly?

We're concerned that some products whose names imply they're environmentally friendly could in fact cause problems if used on your garden. For example, PLANET ARK is too high in sodium at its top loader dose, and in sodium, salinity and pH at its front loader dose, to meet our criteria, though it's very low in phosphorus. And AWARE Garden Safe has too much sodium in its top loader dose to be considered 'safe' for your garden.

Best for your garden

While none of the products is completely harmless, some should be suitable for intermittent use on a home garden or lawn with an area of about 150–200 m². These products have low salinity (less than 3 dS/m); relatively low pH (less than 10.8); low sodium load (less than 20 g per wash); and low phosphorus (less than 1 g per wash, except those marked (A) in the table below, which have less than 3 g per wash).

Except for the TRIMAT, none of these is among the products that are in the *What to buy list* for washing well. >

Front loader dose

AMWAY SAB
AWARE Garden Safe
BIOZET Advance
ECO STORE Front loaders
LAUNDRITE (A)
TRIMAT (A)

Top loader dose

ALPHA Plus Herbal (B)
AMWAY SAB
BEAUTY ENGINEERED Gutsy
BIOZET Advance
ECO STORE Super
SWIPE White HLD

(A) Due to having higher phosphorus levels than the other products, these are suitable only for clay-soil garden areas over 300 m².

(B) Product is being reformulated.



Best for your garden: front loader (top) and top loader detergents.

If you're concerned about phosphorus in waterways and your wash water will just go straight down the drain, look for the 'NP' symbol on packets — it means no or low phosphorus — or those listed under 'Low or no phosphorus' in the table.

PRODUCT		RESULTS								COST AND CONTACT	
		Ok for front loaders	Dirt removal score (%)	Grass stain: above average	Tomato stain: above average	Lippy stain: above average	Contains enzymes	Low or no phosphorus	Low environmental hazard	Contact	Cost per wash (cents)
Detergents (in order of dirt removal within groups)											
Top loader detergents											
Omo High Performance Now with Staizyme			78	✓	✓	✓	✓			omocareline.com.au	58
Trimat Advanced Stain Removing Formula (Aldi)	✓		78	✓	✓	✓	✓			aldi.com.au	27
Drive Advanced Enzyme Power			77	✓	✓	✓	✓			consumerlink.unilever.com	65
You'll Love Coles Cold Active Triple Enzyme			77	✓		✓	✓			coles.com.au	42
Cold Power Advanced			74	✓	✓	✓	✓			colgate.com.au	54
Dynamo New Advanced Formula			72	✓		✓	✓			colgate.com.au	57
Radiant Power 100% Active Enzyme Boosted	✓		69		✓	✓	✓			1800 809 282	56
Radiant Power Cold Enzyme Boosted	✓		69	✓		✓	✓			1800 809 282	52
Woolworths Select Advance Performance			68	✓		✓	✓			woolworths.com.au	37
Radiant Power Tri Target Technology	✓		67		✓	✓	✓			1800 809 282	58
Amway S&B	✓		63	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	amway.com.au	55
You'll Love Coles Hi-performance Triple Enzyme			61	✓		✓	✓			coles.com.au	37
Omo Sensitive			59	✓		✓				omocareline.com.au	55
Woolworths Select Sensitive			58			✓				woolworths.com.au	34
You'll Love Coles Sensitive			58	✓	✓	✓				coles.com.au	33
IGA Swif Power Clean	✓		57			✓	✓			1300 135 690	25
Laundrite Lemon Fresh (Aldi)	✓		57		✓				✓ (C)	aldi.com.au	15
Surf Tropical Breeze			57	✓	✓	✓				surflaundry.com.au	32
BioZet Advance Double Enzyme Action	✓		56			✓	✓	✓	✓	1800 805 730	33
Coles Smart Buy Lemon Fresh	✓		56			✓	✓	✓		coles.com.au	29
Duo with Duofresh Dual Action Fresh Fragrance	✓		55			✓	✓			1800 810 425	43
Fab Sunshine Fresh			54							colgate.com.au	42
Alpha Plus Herbal (A)	✓		53					✓	✓	triniture.com	70
Black & Gold (IGA)	✓		53			✓		✓		1300 135 690	23
Triple 7 Safewash for Allergy Relief	✓		53			✓		✓		1800 777 580	111
Eco Store Plant Based Super (B)	✓		52					✓	✓	ecostore.co.nz	93
Planet Ark High Performance Ideal for Sensitive Skin (A)	✓		52					✓		planetark.com/help	40
Spree Fresh Breeze			52		✓					colgate.com.au	32
Aware Garden Safe Eco Sensitive Improved Formula	✓		47			✓		✓	✓ (D)	1300 731 781	29
Beauty Engineered Gutsy	✓		46			✓		✓	✓	(E)	74
Swipe White HLD Super	✓		46					✓	✓	02 8978 1159	51
Best top loader detergents also suitable for front loader use (tested in a front loader at their front loader dose)											
Trimat Advanced Stain Removing Formula (Aldi)	✓		81	✓	✓		✓		✓ (C)	aldi.com.au	14
Radiant Power 100% Active Enzyme Boosted	✓		76				✓			1800 809 282	28
Radiant Power Cold Enzyme Boosted	✓		76				✓			1800 809 282	26
Radiant Power Tri Target Technology	✓		68				✓			1800 809 282	29

PRODUCT		RESULTS							COST AND CONTACT	
	OK for front loaders	Dirt removal score (%)	Grass stain: above average	Tomato stain: above average	Lippy stain: above average	Contains enzymes	Low or no phosphorus	Low environmental hazard	Contact	Cost per wash (cents)
Detergents (in order of dirt removal within groups)										
Front loader only detergents										
Omo Matic Superior	✓	81	✓	✓	✓	✓			omocareline.com.au	49
Drive Matic Advanced Enzyme Power	✓	80	✓	✓		✓			consumerlink.unilever.com	63
You'll Love Coles Matic Advance	✓	78	✓	✓	✓	✓			coles.com.au	45
Woolworths Select Front Loader	✓	77	✓	✓	✓	✓			woolworths.com.au	37
Dynamo Matic	✓	71			✓	✓			colgate.com.au	56
Cold Power Advanced Matic	✓	69				✓			colgate.com.au	48
Radiant Power3 Matic Tri Target Technology	✓	68	✓	✓	✓	✓			1800 809 282	62
Radiant Matic Power	✓	67	✓	✓	✓	✓			1800 809 282	54
Eco Store Plant Based Front Loader	✓	59		✓			✓	✓	ecostore.co.nz	21
Fab Matic	✓	58							colgate.com.au	49
Omo Matic Sensitive	✓	57			✓				omocareline.com.au	54
Surf Matic	✓	57							surflaundry.com.au	32
Spree Matic Lavender Fresh	✓	56							colgate.com.au	31
Duo Matic	✓	55				✓			1800 810 425	47



HOW WE TESTED

- Dirt removal score** We used each detergent to wash specially soiled polycotton swatches attached to a load of laundry items in cold (20°C) water. Using a spectrophotometer (which measures how much light is reflected off the swatches after filtering out the effects of optical brighteners in the detergents — that is, how 'white' they are), we then measured how much dirt each detergent removed, and expressed this measurement as a percentage. This machine is more accurate than the human eye — differences of about 6% are visible.
- Performance on specific stains** Included in the wash were swatches with lipstick (which tests detergents for their action on particulate stains, like dirt and mud, as well as removal of oily substances), grass (stain removal and a specific enzyme action that targets proteins) and tomato stains (enzyme cocktail action and bleaching effect). Better than average performers have been noted in the table for each stain type.
- Greywater use** A lab that specialises in soil, water and waste water analysis tested the detergents for various chemicals and their pH, with the aim of finding which could most safely be used if you want to water your garden or lawn with greywater from your washing machine. More details of what was analysed are in *Reduce, reuse, recycle*, page 22.

USING THE TABLE

OK for front loaders Because of their tumbling action and lower water use, front loaders usually need a low-sudsing detergent and/or a smaller dose. The four best top loader detergents that can also be used in front loaders were tested in one as well.

Contains enzymes Enzymes help break down protein, starch and biologically based stains such as blood, sweat and make-up.

Low or no phosphorus Phosphates (which contain phosphorus) help soften the water and keep extracted dirt in suspension. In the environment, however, high levels of phosphorus can cause excessive growth of blue-green algae in inland waterways. (See page 22 for more about phosphorus and the environment.)

Detergents with a tick in this column contain less than 1 g of phosphorus per wash. The 'NP' symbol used by major manufacturers on labels means less than 0.5% or no phosphorus. If your wash water will just go straight down the drain, look for this symbol or buy the ticked detergents. Those without a tick still comply with industry standards, containing less than 7.8 g per wash.

Low environmental hazard Meets the criteria outlined in *Best for your garden* on page 23.

Cost per wash This is based on the recommended dosage and the average price found in our price survey in February 2007.

(A) Product is being reformulated.

(B) The recommended dosage has changed on new packaging. This will improve its environmental rating but we can't comment on its performance. New cost per wash would be 58 cents.

(C) For clay-soil garden areas over 300 m².

(D) At its front loader dose only.

(E) www.beautyengineeredforever.com.

Expanding horizons

IN A NUTSHELL

• If you don't have your camera with you, you can't take that perfect shot of a lifetime. So choose a camera that will suit your lifestyle, not one that simply looks impressive.

• A wide-angle lens lets you fit more of the rellies into your next family photo.

• Processing speed is improving with each new generation of digital cameras and helps reduce that annoying lag between the time you press the shutter button and the time the camera takes the shot.

Most cameras on the market are now at least 5 megapixels, which is more than enough to produce an A4-sized photographic-quality print. You now have to look at the bigger picture.

Other factors you should look for are good-quality images, fast response and a clear, bright LCD screen. But first you need to work out what kind of camera you want.

• A digital single-lens reflex (SLR) camera allows you to remove one lens and replace it with a different one, providing lots of scope for creative photography.

These cameras usually offer a good level of manual control over exposure settings, but with a 'point-and-shoot' mode available too if you want to let the camera do all the work.

Digital SLRs are also larger, heavier and generally more expensive than other digital camera types.

• **Bridge** cameras often look like a digital SLR, but have one large fixed lens attached to a large camera body. There's no chance you'll be fitting this into your shirt pocket!

These cameras are a good option if you want some creative control over the exposure settings and a large zoom, but have no desire to use additional lenses or pay the extra dollars for a digital SLR.

• **Compact** cameras are the most popular category in terms of models available, and while all will comfortably fit in a large pocket or handbag, there's a large variety of features and sizes to choose from. They often have a zoom lens that retracts into the body of the camera and usually a point-and-shoot mode as the default setting. Manual settings are also available on many of these cameras if you feel the need to take a little more control over the picture-taking experience.

Going wide

One noteworthy feature showing up on digital cameras is wider-angle lenses, which means you can get more into the photo across the width of the shot. All except the CANON Powershot A630, Powershot G7 and PANASONIC DMC-FZ50 in our *What to buy* list have a 28 or 29 mm lens, whereas the previous standard wide-angle lens on digital cameras was 35 mm or larger. (The numbers refer to the length of the lens, not to the width of the shot — a shorter lens gives a wider angle.) >



what to buy

Digital SLR cameras



NIKON D80 Kit DX 18-70 mm

(27–105 mm 35 mm equivalent — see page 28)

Price \$2498

The NIKON is the overall top camera in this test. It has a bright, accurate viewfinder, reproduces fine detail with 10 megapixels, starts up in under a second and can shoot three frames per second.

If you don't mind carrying around a camera that weighs over 1 kg, you should be rewarded with some quality images.

Although we tested the NIKON with the 18–70 mm lens, the company tells us its standard kit is now sold with an 18–135 mm lens. As with all SLRs, changing the lens will have an impact on image quality.

The price is the manufacturer's recommended retail for the body and 18–70 mm lens combined; the package with the body and 18–135 mm lens is about \$120 cheaper.



CANON EOS 400D + 18-55 mm EF-S

(29–88 mm 35 mm equivalent)

Price \$1499

The CANON is easy to use, with a fast start-up time and good performance in both single-picture and continuous-shooting modes, although some of the photos were underexposed in the fully automatic mode.

Noticeable vignetting at the wide setting and scores of just 53% and 58% for auto and manual image quality respectively could be attributed to the lens that comes with the kit.

If you want to get the most out of either the CANON or NIKON digital SLR, buy the body on its own and add a better-quality lens — which will of course add to the overall cost of the camera.

Bridge cameras

If you're looking for a large zoom range, good performance and manual program modes, one of these cameras will fit the bill. You can't change the lens like you can with a digital SLR camera, but you'll get similar features for a lot less money.



FUJIFILM FINEPIX S6500fd

Price \$629

The FUJIFILM has a very large zoom range from 28 mm up to 300 mm, good low-light performance and a face-recognition focusing feature that makes it a good option for indoor photography and family gatherings. It also has a very good monitor in terms of accuracy.

However, its continuous-shooting performance is poor and a poor electronic stabilisation system counts against it when using the lens at its full 300 mm length.



PANASONIC DMC-FZ50

Price \$899

The PANASONIC's wide-angle setting is only 35 mm, but at the other end you can get close to the action using the 420 mm (35 mm equivalent) telephoto. It has good optical image stabilisation but still requires the use of a tripod when shooting towards its 420 mm setting.

The camera has good manual controls that are easy to locate and use. Both the viewfinder and LCD screen are accurate.

Compact cameras



CANON POWERSHOT A630

Price \$499

The CANON Powershot A630 is the least expensive in the *What to buy* list, with a good collection of manual and automatic exposure controls, making it one of the most versatile in the test.

It doesn't perform well in low-light situations and though the monitor is very accurate, we found the viewfinder accuracy borderline.

The range of the 35–140 mm lens (starting at only 35 mm) also makes it less versatile when trying to include as much of a scene as possible in a photograph.



CANON POWERSHOT G7

Price \$899

The CANON Powershot G7 has more manual controls than a standard 'point and shoot' camera and a hot-shoe connection that allows you to add an external flash for more options in low light. An ISO dial at the top of the camera also allows you to quickly alter the camera's light sensitivity.

The LCD monitor is bright and accurate and partly makes up for an optical (not LCD) viewfinder. The 35–210 mm zoom range is also limiting when taking wide-angle shots, compared to a camera that incorporates a 28 mm focal length in its zoom lens.



PANASONIC DMC-LX2

Price \$799

The PANASONIC DMC-LX2 delivers fine detail with 10 megapixels, has a good image stabilisation function and a wide-angle zoom lens that's useful for panoramas and indoor photos. However, this wider 28 mm view is only available in a 16:9 widescreen format, unlike most digital photos, which are produced at an aspect ratio of 4:3, similar to traditional TV screens. This may cause problems when printing out on standard-sized photo paper as there will be blank space above and below the print. The image will look very impressive when shown on a widescreen TV, though.

Although there's no viewfinder, the LCD monitor is accurate.



CANON DIGITAL IXUS 850 IS

Price \$749

The CANON Digital Ixus 850 IS packs a lot into a small package, with a wide-angle zoom lens that's ideal for panoramas and indoor photos, and an extremely quick start-up time and shutter delay.

Although it doesn't perform well in low-light situations, a good optical stabilisation system means you can use lower than normal shutter speeds before resorting to the onboard flash.

It also performs well when taking video, delivering excellent quality 640 x 480 resolution video at up to 30 frames per second.

A compact camera often has a zoom lens and usually a point-and-shoot mode as the default setting. Manual settings are also available on many of these cameras if you want more control over the picture-taking experience.

< If your eyes glaze over whenever words such as wide angle, zoom or telephoto are mentioned, numbers such as 28 mm or 35–140 mm are sure to add to the confusion. But knowing what the numbers mean is very important when buying your next camera as they determine the type of photos you'll be able to take, and the only way to truly compare across all models is to take note of the '35 mm equivalent' figure that's often provided on the lens.

Each lens on a 35 mm film camera produces a photo with the same angle of view (35 mm is the width of the film frame), regardless of what camera you use. However, the viewing angle of a lens for a digital still camera can vary significantly from model to model due

to different sizes of the charge-coupled device (CCD), which is a light sensor (equivalent to film) that records the image to the camera's memory.

A '35 mm equivalent' figure means the numbers shown for the zoom range on the digital camera operate in the same way as a traditional 35 mm film camera.

A 50 mm lens is known as a 'normal' lens because it produces an image with a similar view to a human's eye. Anything less than a 50 mm lens is considered wide-angle, with the most popular wide-angle lenses being 28 mm or 24 mm. A telephoto lens (which lets you take photos of things further away) generally begins at 90 mm for a portrait lens, up to the huge 400 mm and 600 mm lenses that you might see professional photographers using at the cricket or tennis.

A zoom lens can accommodate taking photos at different distances, able to range from, say, 35–140 mm or 28–300 mm.

Don't be tempted to use the range of a zoom lens as your only purchasing criterion. The RICOH Caplio R5, for example, delivers a very good zoom range at 28–200 mm, which would cover most picture-taking situations. However, the start-up time is slow, the delay between pressing the button and taking the picture is the worst of the cameras tested at two seconds and the image quality is only OK. It was also rated the hardest camera to use. >



The three images at left, taken from an identical position, show what an image will look like when taken with a wide angle (28 mm), normal (50 mm) and telephoto (300 mm) lens. As you can see, there are dramatic differences between them.



what to look for

- **Image stabilisation technology** can help to deliver a sharp picture even when the camera is shaking or a photo is taken using a telephoto lens. However, some of this 'anti shake' magic is nothing more than smoke and mirrors and you need to be aware of the differences.

Optical image stabilisation is the most effective way to get a good-quality image without any loss of quality, using floating lenses and gyroscopes to counter any movement of the camera during the taking of a photo.

Some cameras instead offer Best Shot Selection (BSS), where a number of images are taken when you press the shutter and the camera decides which image is the sharpest. This is an unsatisfactory solution as it slows down the photo-taking process and will often do nothing more than create several blurry images.

'Digital image stabilisation', which is also known as 'Anti Shake DSP', 'Advanced Image Stabilisation' or just 'Anti Shake', alters the light sensitivity of the camera (often referred to as an ISO figure of 200, 400, 1600, etc), which in turn allows the camera to use a faster shutter speed to take the shot. However, choosing a higher light sensitivity often comes at a cost, as this can lead to a grainy-looking image.

- **Manual aperture/shutter** Aperture controls the depth of field in your picture, allowing you to determine which parts of the image are in or out of focus. Setting the shutter speed manually is handy if you're



HOW WE TESTED

- The digital camera test is an international one that CHOICE shares with several other consumer organisations. The testers recently revised their test method and rating scale to keep up with movements in camera technology, and the results for the newly tested models (given in the table, page 30) can't be directly compared with results for older models that may still be available from previous tests.
- To compare the camera's images at their best quality, the testers captured photos of people and objects in normal situations (indoors and outdoors, in both manual and automatic modes), checked colour reproduction (a technical test done in both manual and automatic modes), and measured picture 'noise' and resolution (sharpness) as well as focusing speed and accuracy. They also tested for exposure accuracy, vignetting (loss of brightness at the photo's edges) and distortion (curving straight lines).
- A panel of five people assessed how easy each camera is to use. They checked the camera's manual, viewfinder, monitor, ease of inserting and removing the memory card, and changing settings, controls and batteries. Our testers also recorded timing for continuous shooting, the delay from completely off to the camera being ready to take a photo (start-up time) and shutter delay.
- To see how versatile each camera is, the testers looked at its lens

characteristics (zoom and aperture settings), memory, light sensitivity adjustment (ISO), white balance, shutter, exposure options, viewfinder/monitor size and adjustment, image deletion, flash type and red eye reduction, manual and auto focus options, battery/power options, audio and video connections and image stabilisation.

- They paid special attention to the viewfinder/monitor, measuring the difference between the height and width displayed in the viewfinder/monitor and what's recorded on the final image, and checked the image quality for both.
- Battery life was measured by the number of photos you're likely to be able to take with freshly charged or new batteries. Cameras with a score of 100% managed over 250 of the following cycles before the first 'battery low' warning: turn on in record mode, zoom full range and back, take photo, image viewed for five seconds in playback mode then deleted, camera set to record mode and the cycle begun again. Every second image was taken with the flash turned on.
- The flash was tested at one, three and five metres to check the exposure is even across the image.
- For cameras that can record video, four 'highest-quality' movies were made and then scored for resolution of detail, fluency of playback, picture noise and pixilation caused by compression.

taking photos of fast-moving objects or to compensate for low light.

- **Continuous manual focusing** All the cameras in this test have autofocus, but manual focus is useful for situations such as low light and subjects behind glass or with little contrast. Continuous manual focus is more useful than a number of preset distances, as it allows for more precise control.
- **Program or special scene modes** allow you to select a common picture-taking situation, such as a beach scene, landscape shot or portrait. Once selected, the camera adjusts the shutter speed and aperture to reflect the type of shot required.
- All the cameras tested are **PictBridge-compatible**, which means they can transfer an image directly to a PictBridge-compatible printer without using a computer.

The menu screen of the camera allows you to choose your images and even perform some basic editing tasks such as cropping a picture and rotating it before sending it to the printer.

- A **memory card** is simply digital film, so make sure to take extra memory cards with you on your holiday or any trip where you don't have easy access to a computer to download your images. Some cameras come with a memory card and may also have an internal memory (see the table for model details), but this won't be enough for more than a few shots at the highest-quality setting.

Ideally, if you have a couple of 1 GB memory cards with you (or an MP3 player you can download photos onto), you won't ever have to worry about how many shots you have left.

If you find yourself running out of memory and don't want to delete any photos, but are desperate to take several more shots, reduce the quality of the image capture. Your shots may not be at the highest resolution, but at least you won't have lost an opportunity to record the moment.

- **Compression** — the process that shrinks a photo's file size — is another factor that affects image quality. Most cameras take photos as compressed JPEG files, which allows you to store more images on a memory card. Compression also makes it faster to save and download photos and easier to email them or download them from a website.

Compression causes a small amount of data loss, though, so if you need the absolute best-quality images, consider buying a camera that takes uncompressed photos, where the file saved will be in TIF format or as a RAW file. You'll fit a lot fewer of these uncompressed images on your memory card, but you'll get the sharpest, clearest, most detailed pictures possible. Of the cameras in the *What to buy* list the NIKON D80 SLR, CANON EOS 400D SLR, PANASONIC DMC-LX2, PANASONIC DMC-FZ50 and FUJIFILM FinePix S6500fd can save images as either TIF format or uncompressed RAW files.



Don't be tempted to use the range of a zoom lens as your only purchase criterion. One tested camera with a good zoom range has a slow start-up time, two-second delay between pressing the button and taking the picture, only average image quality, and is hard to use as well.

MODEL	PERFORMANCE									FEATURES		
	Overall score (%)	Auto image quality score (%)	Manual image quality score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Versatility score (%)	Viewfinder / monitor score (%)	Battery life score (%)	Flash score (%)	Movie quality score (%)	Image stabilisation system: optical / electronic	Overall stabilisation result	Manual aperture / shutter
SLR cameras												
Nikon D80 Kit DX 18–70mm	72	61	60	80	66	71	100	65	na			✓ / ✓
Canon EOS 400D + 18–55mm EF-S	68	53	58	79	60	70	100	48	na			✓ / ✓
Bridge cameras												
Fujifilm FinePix S6500fd	71	67	70	66	72	65	100	82	45	– / ✓	Very poor	✓ / ✓
Panasonic DMC-FZ50	71	65	67	68	80	66	100	73	37	✓ / –	OK	✓ / ✓
Compact cameras												
Canon Powershot A630	69	64	68	66	82	53	100	66	54			✓ / ✓
Canon Powershot G7	69	62	66	64	84	56	100	68	55	✓ / –	Borderline	✓ / ✓
Panasonic DMC-LX2	69	67	67	71	64	68	93	57	39	✓ / –	Borderline	✓ / ✓
Canon Digital ixus 850 IS	68	61	66	71	67	51	100	66	61	✓ / –	Good	– / –
Canon Digital ixus 900 Ti	67	60	65	66	64	52	100	73	56			– / –
Nikon Coolpix S10	67	65	69	63	66	51	100	74	50	✓ / –	Borderline	– / –
Panasonic DMC-FX07	66	58	61	69	55	67	100	55	55	✓ / –	Very poor	– / –
Sony Cyber-shot DSC-N2	66	65	64	65	57	58	92	77	36			✓ (B) / ✓
Sony Cyber-shot DSC-T10 (A)	64	61	60	68	55	57	93	66	36	✓ / –	Poor	– / –
Pentax Optio W20	63	62	66	53	64	52	100	71	44	– / ✓	Very poor	– / –
Samsung NV7 OPS	63	63	67	57	49	59	99	61	41	✓ / ✓	Poor	✓ / ✓
Olympus SP-S10UZ (A)	62	68	62	34	75	62	100	72	44	– / ✓	Poor	✓ / ✓
Nikon Coolpix L5	61	56	61	55	55	53	100	70	51	✓ / –	Poor	– / –
Olympus µ 725SW (A)	61	60	57	59	50	57	95	74	30	– / ✓	Very poor	– / –
Olympus µ 750 (A)	61	63	60	56	48	42	100	80	31	✓ / –	Poor	– / –
Samsung NV10	61	68	69	48	45	59	100	64	38	– / ✓	Very poor	– / ✓
Casio Exilim EX-Z700	56	59	61	33	50	62	100	61	45	– / ✓	Very poor	– / –
Olympus FE-190 (A)	55	65	56	47	33	54	100	53	28	– / ✓	Very poor	– / –
Ricoh Caplio R5	55	62	56	27	59	58	100	66	43	✓ / –	Poor	– / –
Kodak EasyShare C875	53	53	49	34	56	55	95	69	41			✓ / ✓
Kodak EasyShare Z710	53	60	55	33	48	53	100	60	30			✓ / ✓

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Image quality (auto and manual are equal): 30%
- Ease of use: 25%
- Versatility: 12%
- Viewfinder/monitor: 12%
- Battery life: 10%
- Flash: 8%
- Movie quality: 3%

Features See *What to look for*, page 28, for more detail.

Effective resolution is calculated from the number of pixels in the largest image the camera can produce.

Shutter delay The time it takes from the moment the shutter button is pressed to when the picture is taken. Half depressing the shutter button will engage auto exposure and focus and substantially reduce this time with most cameras.

Memory type

- xD: xD Card.
- MS: Memory Stick, MS Duo: small format.
- SD: Secure Digital card.
- MM: Multimedia card
- CF, CFII: Compact Flash

Batteries Li-ion batteries are rechargeable. However,

if you're caught short of power and don't have time to recharge, it's also useful to be able to use normal alkaline batteries if the camera can take them. Unfortunately none of the cameras in the table that come with Li-ion batteries can use alkalines. Those that say 'AA' can use rechargeable NiMH or Li-ion AA batteries, or non-rechargeable alkalines.

Prices are recommended retail, as at January 2007.

na Not applicable — can't record movies. The points are allocated across the other categories.

(A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some shops.

(B) Only three settings: no aperture priority setting, only fully manual.



SPECIFICATIONS

Effective resolution (megapixels)	Zoom range (35 mm equivalent)	Viewfinder type	Monitor size (mm, W x H)	Shutter delay (sec)	Memory type, supplied MB	Internal memory, MB	Number / type of batteries	Size (cm, W x H x D)	Weight (g)	Price (\$)
10.0	27-105	Optical	48 x 32	0.47	SD, 0		1 x Li-Ion	14 x 11 x 15	1045	2498
10.1	29-88	Optical	50 x 33	0.33	CF II, 0		1 x Li-Ion	13 x 14 x 10	810	1499
6.1	28-300	LCD	50 x 37	0.53	xD, 0	10	4 x AA	13.5 x 10 x 14	730	629
10.0	35-420	LCD	39 x 29	0.82	SD, 32		1 x Li-Ion	14 x 8.5 x 15	770	899
8.0	35-140	Optical	50 x 38	0.71	MM, 16		4 x AA	11 x 7 x 5	370	499
10.0	35-210	Optical	50 x 38	0.90	SD, 32		1 x Li-Ion	11 x 7.5 x 4.5	380	899
10.0	28-112	None	60 x 34	0.57	SD, 0	13	1 x Li-Ion	11 x 6 x 5	240	799
7.1	28-105	Optical	50 x 38	0.26	SD, 16		1 x Li-Ion	9 x 6 x 3	175	749
10.0	37-111	Optical	50 x 38	0.52	SD, 32		1 x Li-Ion	9.5 x 6 x 3	188	799
5.9	38-380	None	50 x 38	0.40	SD, 0	16	1 x Li-Ion	2 x 7.5 x 4	260	599
7.1	28-102	None	50 x 38	0.57	SD, 16		1 x Li-Ion	9.5 x 5.5 x 2.7	160	599
10.0	38-114	None	59 x 44	0.53	MS DUO, 0	25	1 x Li-Ion	10 x 6.5 x 2.6	181	749
7.1	38-114	None	49 x 37	0.30	MS DUO, 0	56	1 x Li-Ion	9.5 x 5.5 x 2.2	160	549
7.1	38-114	None	50 x 37	0.79	SD, 0	22	1 x Li-Ion	11.5 x 5.5 x 3.5	151	399
7.1	38-270	None	50 x 38	0.45	SD, 0	19	1 x Li-Ion	11 x 6.5 x 6.5	290	649
7.1	38-380	LCD	50 x 38	1.44	xD, 0	21.5	4 x AA	10.5 x 7.5 x 8.5	480	499
7.1	38-190	None	50 x 37	0.87	SD, 0	8	2 x AA	10 x 6.5 x 5	245	449
7.1	38-114	None	49 x 37	0.59	xD, 0	19	1 x Li-Ion	9.5 x 6.5 x 2.2	165	599
7.1	36-180	None	48 x 36	0.54	xD, 0	18.5	1 x Li-Ion	9.5 x 5.5 x 2.8	136	499
10.0	35-105	None	50 x 38	1.06	SD, 0	20	1 x Li-Ion	9.5 x 6.5 x 3	165	599
7.1	38-114	None	53 x 40	1.48	SD, 0	8.3	1 x Li-Ion	9.5 x 6 x 2.2	140	549
5.9	38-114	None	50 x 37	1.15	xD, 0	23	1 x Li-Ion	9.5 x 6 x 2.1	128	299
7.1	28-200	None	50 x 37	2.05	SD, 0	30	1 x Li-Ion	9.5 x 6 x 3	165	499
8.0	37-185	None	50 x 39	1.46	SD, 0	28	2 x AA	9.5 x 7 x 4	250	299
7.1	38-380	LCD	40 x 30	1.47	SD, 0	28	2 x AA	10.5 x 8 x 8.5	375	399



Unusual toughness

We can't fit every feature of every camera into a table, but sometimes a model has something worth a special mention.

The OLYMPUS μ725SW (left) rates 61% overall in our table — it's OK but not a standout camera. However, what makes it so useful for the active photographer is its ability to take some harsh treatment in and out of the water. Waterproof to a depth of 5 m, the compact μ725SW was also able to take a drop onto its side from 1.5 m.

When you pay several hundred dollars for a camera, it's nice to know it will take a lot of punishment, particularly if you'll be using it as a travel or sports camera.

Private health insurance now more flexible

Under new legislation that's planned to come into effect on 1 April, private health insurance funds can cover a new range of treatments.

Traditionally, private health insurance covered in-hospital treatments under hospital insurance policies, and 'extras' treatments not covered by Medicare, such as optical or dental, under ancillary policies.

This meant that for privately insured patients, treatments like chemotherapy or dialysis could only be covered in hospital, even if safe and suitable out-of-hospital options existed.

Cover for the new treatments can be offered combined with a hospital or ancillary policy or as a separate policy.

New services covered

Health funds can now offer policies that cover health services such as:

- Disease management programs for people with a chronic illness, such as diabetes or heart disease. This could include a personalised telephone assessment by a nurse and reminders for regular checks.
- Prevention and support programs for people at high risk of developing a chronic disease, which can include treatments such as physiotherapy that were formerly only available under an ancillary policy.
- Out-of-hospital provision of services such as dialysis at home.
- Out-of-hospital provision of other services — for example, early discharge programs combined with nursing care at home providing wound dressing for patients recovering from an operation.

But you still won't be able to receive a benefit from private hospital insurance for the cost gap between out-of-hospital services that are covered by Medicare, but provided by specialists and GPs who charge more than the Medicare Schedule fee.

It's expected that it will take some time for all health funds to develop new policies offering this type of cover, but some health

funds have already made new policies available to their members and others may cover some of these new treatments under their normal hospital policies. In the meantime if your doctor says out-of-hospital treatment might be suitable for you, check with your fund that it's covered.

New options for chronically ill people

Over the last few years a number of funds have introduced programs at no extra cost to help chronically ill members better manage their health and limit the amount of time they need to spend in hospital.

If you suffer from a chronic disease such as a heart condition or diabetes and have private health insurance, contact your health fund to check whether it has a program available that would suit your needs.

CHOICE verdict

The new rules will give chronically ill people new options under private health insurance. CHOICE also supports the focus on preventative health services. However, we think the Government should also introduce more preventative health services for people without private health cover so that they're not disadvantaged.



CHEAPER HEALTH INSURANCE FOR SOME

While health insurance premiums went up by 4.5% on average this year, two groups of people could pay less.

- The new health insurance rules provide cheaper cover for people who joined health insurance later in life and so have to pay a **surcharge** on the premium under the Government's Lifetime Health Cover system.

Under the system, if you haven't joined a health fund by 1 July after your 31st birthday, when you do join you'll pay a 2% surcharge per year, up to a maximum surcharge of 70%. So, for example, if you join at 45 you pay 30% more than someone who joined at 30.

The new rules now say after you've paid the

surcharge continuously for 10 years, your premiums will revert back to the normal premium paid by people who joined at 30.

- **Single parents** will also benefit from new rules for private health insurance. Traditionally they paid about the same premium as families or couples, about double the amount paid by a single person.

The new rules now enable health funds to discount policies for single parents. For example, HBA and MEDIBANK PRIVATE have reduced premiums for single parents on some policies by up to 25% (HBA) or 30% (MEDIBANK).

Other health funds will soon also offer discounts, so shop around for the best offer.

NEW WEBSITE

The Private Health Insurance Ombudsman will release a new website that helps consumers compare private health insurance policies for their cover, exclusions, waiting periods, premiums and excesses. Check www.privatehealth.gov.au.

High and dry



test

Babies and nappies, no matter what kind you choose, just go together. Whether you're a first-time parent or an old hand, if a little bundle of joy has come your way of late you're going to be spending a lot of time dealing with and probably worrying about nappies.

For a happy baby, not to mention a happy parent, the right nappy is important. You'll want something that keeps your baby dry and comfortable, doesn't leak and doesn't break the budget. We asked recipients of CHOICE's 'baby' e-newsletter and their friends and family with babies to try a selection of disposable nappies to see which ones stood up to the challenge.

The babies have voted

HUGGIES Crawler was the overwhelming favourite by a large margin — they scored 93%. Our testers found that HUGGIES were the least likely to leak, kept a high level of dryness throughout use, had little shifting of material or disintegration and fitted the best.

SELECT Crawler from Woolworths, while scoring quite a bit lower than HUGGIES (75%), was also rated significantly better than average overall and is much cheaper at just 38 cents per nappy, compared to 47 cents for HUGGIES.

Disposables and the environment

Currently about 95% of parents in Australia use disposable nappies — up from 89% in 2001. So, while the debate about cloth vs disposable nappies has been raging for years now, it looks as though the on-the-ground decision is very firmly in the direction of

disposable. But plenty of parents, no matter which way they decide to go, can still feel guilty seeing the kind of figures that surface in the nappy debate.

It's disturbing to read that the average baby using normal disposable nappies can create over 700 kg of solid waste, which will probably go into landfill and take up to 400 years to break down. But old-fashioned cloth nappies don't necessarily hold all the solutions either, with plenty of issues around energy and water consumption when washing them.

A recent study conducted by the UK Government Environment Agency assessed the environmental impacts of disposable nappies, home-laundried cloth nappies and commercial cloth nappy services. This study took into account the entire lifecycle of the environmental impact of all three options. What it discovered was that there were no significant differences between any of the environmental impacts, and that overall no system clearly has a better or worse environmental performance.

However, because nappy usage in Australia won't be exactly the same, an independent lifecycle assessment of nappies under Brisbane conditions has been conducted by the University of Queensland. This study found that cloth nappies use more water, while disposables use more energy and create landfill. But the main finding was that there's so much variation in how nappies are used by parents that the environmental impact is almost impossible to determine.

With water shortages in Australia and different climate zones that may or may not be suitable for >

DISPOSABLE NAPPIES

IN A NUTSHELL

- HUGGIES stood out from the pack — again — as the top-rating nappy for our trialists.
- Despite all the research into the environmental impact of disposable and cloth nappies, the jury is still out on which is worse. It could well be different in different areas.



WHAT TO BUY

HUGGIES Crawler	47 cents per nappy
SELECT Crawler	38 cents per nappy
BABYLOVE Crawler	40 cents per nappy
HOME BRAND Medium	29 cents per nappy
BABYLOVE Ecobots Crawler	45 cents per nappy
SNUGLERS Crawler	30 cents per nappy

HUGGIES were rated far and away the best, but several of the nappies with a good score are a lot cheaper if you need to save money.



HOW WE TESTED

- Almost 100 volunteers and their babies took part in this test. The babies were a mix of 65% girls and 35% boys, and weighed between 5 and 10 kg ('medium' or 'crawler' version of most nappies).
- Our volunteers were sent 10 'daytime' nappies from each of seven different brands. We repackaged and labelled each brand with a number, although as each has a different design and some label their products with their brand name, some of our testers may have recognised some or all of the brands they tried.
- Our testers used each brand for two days during the day only. They rated the nappies for leakage, dryness, shifting of the nappy material, the effectiveness of the nappy fasteners and the size of the nappy. They also rated each nappy overall and told us how likely they would be to buy it.

A recent UK study that looked at disposable nappies, home-laundried cloth nappies and commercial cloth nappy services found that none was clearly better for the environment.

< air-drying cloth nappies, it seems the jury is still out on the best way to go. It may be different in different areas.

New kids on the block

Just to make any new parent's head spin even more, there are now all kinds of new products on the market. There are fitted cloth nappies that look and fasten like disposables but can be washed, biodegradable pads that can be fitted inside washable pants and even disposable nappies that claim to be biodegradable.

BABYLOVE EcoBots claim to be a "premium-quality environmentally sensitive nappy", and it's the only disposable nappy endorsed by environmental lobby group Planet Ark.

Planet Ark says that while it's traditionally encouraged parents to use cloth nappies, it's now accepted this is unrealistic due to the continued growth in popularity of

disposables and the time required to wash and line-dry cloth nappies. Planet Ark is now supporting disposables that can biodegrade. Currently it's working with BABYLOVE EcoBots and hopes to develop a 100% biodegradable disposable nappy in the future.

Swinburne University conducted independent tests in a controlled environment and found that within a week the EcoBots began to biodegrade, and within several weeks up to 70% of the material had broken down. Although Swinburne says it's very pleased by the results of these tests, it hasn't tested how well the nappies would break down in landfill at this stage.

Our volunteers rated BABYLOVE EcoBots equal fifth overall of the 11 nappies tested (scoring 71%), and they're included in the *What to buy* list. However, they're nearly as expensive as HUGGIES, the top-rating nappies. But if you're concerned about the environmental



profiles

Nappies in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order.



HUGGIES Crawler

Price per nappy 47 cents

This nappy was hands down our volunteers' favourite. It rated significantly better than average for all the survey questions — and 88% of trialists said they'd already used this brand even though it's the equal most expensive nappy tested. It's also the only one in the trial with a separate design for girls and boys.

Trialist comments

"Nice, snug, secure nappy. Held a lot of moisture."

"The fasteners were more like Velcro rather than sticky — not sticking properly was not an issue. There was no stickiness to lose."

"Love the 'material' feel of the nappy. It fits my baby really well, not too baggy or oversized."

"They work very well, but I'm not keen on all the extra pictures and colours. Disposables are wasteful enough without all the extra effort and materials to manufacture them."



SELECT Crawler

Price per nappy 38 cents

This nappy rated significantly higher than average overall and is quite a bit cheaper than HUGGIES. It's a Woolworths brand and only available in those supermarkets.

Trialist comments

"Love the design of the fasteners! So easy to grab and do up!"

"Very happy with this nappy. Would use these instead of what I currently use."

"Liked the fit — especially the high back and wide grip tabs."

"It's a very basic nappy but if the price was good it would still do the job."

"We found this nappy as good as the Huggies we normally use, which have the market perception of being the best."





impact of disposable nappies, EcoBots might be worth trying out next time you're at the supermarket. The manufacturer says a new version of this nappy has been released since our trial that's more biodegradable and has improved absorbency and fit.

Although using and laundering your own cloth nappies is still probably the cheapest option, with around 95% of Australian parents now using disposable nappies, for the moment convenience seems to be winning over both cost and any environmental considerations. ■

USING THE TABLE

Product COLES' new nappies weren't available in time to be included.

Scores The overall score is a separate score given by the trialists — it's not a combination of other scores.

Price per nappy is based on prices from August/September 2006 for the largest pack size we could find.

PRODUCT	SCORES			COST
	Overall score (%)	Leakage score (%)	Dryness score (%)	
Nappy (number of testers)				
Huggies Crawler (54)	93	97	94	47
Select Crawler (Woolworths) (55)	75	88	78	38
BabyLove Crawler (58)	74	86	76	40
Home Brand Medium (Woolworths) (58)	72	90	78	29
BabyLove Ecobots Crawler (58)	71	78	74	45
Snugglers Crawler (53)	71	83	77	30
Mamia Crawler (Aldi) (55)	66	86	79	29
Cosifits Crawler (54)	64	76	71	26
Bebes Medium (55)	61	78	65	47
Black & Gold Medium (IGA) (54)	58	80	68	32
Baby Solutions Medium (Kmart) (56)	52	66	58	25

BABYLOVE Crawler

Price per nappy 40 cents

It's around the same price as the SELECT Crawler but should be available at a range of supermarkets.

Trialist comments

"A rare 5–10 kg nappy that actually fits a 9 kg baby! Most are small."

"Elastic front and back was great. I also really like the wide, flat extension pieces either side of the fasteners."

"This nappy was much slimmer between the legs than others I have trialled so far. I thought it was more comfortable with the elastic back and front."

"A perfect fit!"

"Allowed baby to become a little damp. However, it fit very well and maintained shape."

"Gel 'beads' oozed through to baby's bottom twice."

HOME BRAND Medium

Price per nappy 29 cents

While it rated 72% overall, it scored 90% for not leaking, second only to HUGGIES. It's a very good price at 29 cents per nappy, but only available at Woolworths.

Trialist comments

"Very happy with this nappy — just a bit big."

"Great — would be better for babies at the larger end of the weight range. I liked the elasticised back."

"There seemed to be a fair amount of absorbent material in the nappy, which kept baby dry. The tabs worked well."

"In the catch the nappy was far too wide, causing it to bunch and appear uncomfortable"

"The between-the-legs part moved too much, so that there was only thin material left."



BABYLOVE EcoBots Crawler

Price per nappy 45 cents

This nappy is claimed to be better for the environment than other major-brand disposables because it biodegrades faster (see *New kids on the block*, above left). Although the two BABYLOVE nappies didn't rate significantly differently from each other overall, the EcoBots are a little more expensive than the regular BABYLOVEs.

Trialist comments

"I am considering using these nappies instead of Huggies. We had no crystals on the baby and I was very impressed with it."

"No leaks at all — even after a big sleep."

"I thought this nappy was very good. It was dry, compact to dispose of and fitted well."

"These worked really well and over long periods between changes."

SNUGGLERS Crawler

Price per nappy 30 cents

Another of the cheaper products on test that trialists quite liked — it rated about the same as HOME BRAND, costs a similar amount and should be available in more supermarkets.

Trialist comments

"I think the nappy was very good. I didn't notice any crystals on my baby. They didn't leak."

"This was a great nappy. Comfortable fit, very absorbent and very secure."

"I like the wide fasteners, but I would say that maybe having an elastic band front, back or both would definitely help secure it better [so it won't] ride down."

"Overall good. Although the absorbency was good, I didn't feel it would be great for long-duration use."



Vegetables: are fresh best?

Next time you're in a rush to get dinner on the table, don't feel bad about serving frozen or even canned veges. By the time you eat them, fresh vegetables can have lower levels of important nutrients, such as vitamin C, than their frozen counterparts. And while canned vegetables retain less vitamin C than frozen, they still contain as much dietary fibre as fresh, as well as retaining many other valuable nutrients.

Processing pluses

Freezing and canning factories are usually close to where the vegetables are grown. This means that the inevitable loss of nutrients during processing is partly offset by the veges starting off in a fresher state than you can buy them 'fresh' from the supermarket.

Although canning is definitely not a vitamin C-friendly process, canned vegetables only have to be heated through. So there's less loss of this nutrient than with fresh or frozen vegetables that take longer to cook. On the downside, canned veg often have salt added. It's not necessary for processing and is best avoided — so

check the label and choose brands without added salt.

And the 'fresh' veg in your local supermarket may not be as fresh as you might think (see CHOICE, August 2006). Advances in technology have made it possible for growers and distributors to keep vegetables looking good for at least a couple of weeks — but they're not really fresh. So we decided to have a look at the nutrient levels in some of the fresh vegetables from Woolworths/Safeway and Coles and compare them with their frozen or canned counterparts.

Which nutrients?

Before testing we combined each set of samples of tomatoes, spinach, green beans, carrots, corn and broccoli, so we're reporting average values across both supermarket chains for fresh and across all included brands for frozen and canned vegetables.

The results show the levels of vitamin C and beta-carotene (and lycopene for tomatoes) per 100 g of vegetable as percentages of the recommended dietary intake (RDI) for adults (vitamin C, 45 mg; beta-carotene,

IN A NUTSHELL

- Frozen and canned vegetables may not have the texture (and sometimes the flavour) of fresh ones, but they can be just as nutritious. Broccoli was the only frozen vegetable in our test that was less nutritious than fresh.
- When you buy fresh veges, don't keep them too long before you use them. Vegetables (especially green ones) continue to lose some of their nutrients while they're stored in your fridge.



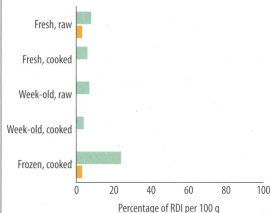
results

The percentage of the recommended dietary intake (RDI) for adults of important nutrients that our tests found in fresh (raw and cooked), frozen and canned versions of six vegetables (continued overleaf). The results also show how much of the nutrients fresh vegetables can lose over a week's storage.

GREEN BEANS

Beans are a good source of vitamin C. Even after cooking, frozen green beans had twice as much vitamin C as fresh beans.

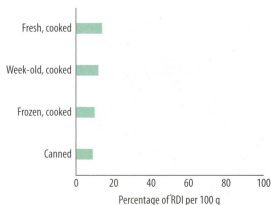
What's best? (1) frozen; (2) fresh.



CORN

Frozen and canned corn had marginally less vitamin C than fresh but the differences aren't enough to worry about. We measured beta-carotene but the percentages are too small to show.

What's best? If you want convenience, go for canned or frozen corn.





5.4 mg). As there's no specific RDI for lycopene we used the value for beta-carotene for comparison (lycopene is regarded as a kind of first cousin to beta-carotene).

We picked those nutrients because some or all of the above vegetables are a good source of them. Here's why they're important:

- **Vitamin C** This is the most easily destroyed nutrient in vegetables, so it's a good marker of a vegetable's overall freshness, as well as an important nutrient in its own right. If you don't get enough you get scurvy — though these days that's very rare — but it's also an antioxidant and may be protective against heart disease and some forms of cancer. It's one of the water-soluble vitamins (the others are the B vitamins, which include thiamin, riboflavin, niacin, folate, pyridoxine and B₁₂).

- **Beta-carotene** is an antioxidant and again may help to prevent heart disease and some cancers. Some of it's lost during processing and cooking, though it's not as easily destroyed as vitamin C. In the body, beta-carotene can be converted into vitamin A, one of the fat-soluble vitamins (the others are D, E and K). >



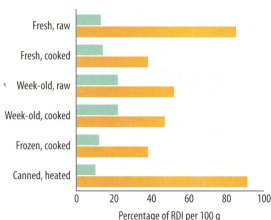
HOW WE TESTED

- We bought vegetables from three Coles and three Woolworths (Safeway) stores in different suburbs across Melbourne. The fresh vegetables were the best quality available from each store; the frozen and canned vegetables were top-selling brands.
- Our lab then tested the vegies for the following nutrients: vitamin C, beta-carotene and lycopene (tomatoes only).
- We tested the fresh vegies both raw and cooked and then retested them a week later. The exception was corn, which we only tested cooked.
- The fresh and frozen vegetables were steamed for 10 minutes and the canned ones heated before testing.

CARROTS

Carrots are a good source of beta-carotene. Canned carrots had the most, probably because different varieties are often used for canning (for 'baby carrots' or for better texture) and these may, coincidentally, contain more beta-carotene. The fresh, frozen and canned carrots all had much the same levels of vitamin C.

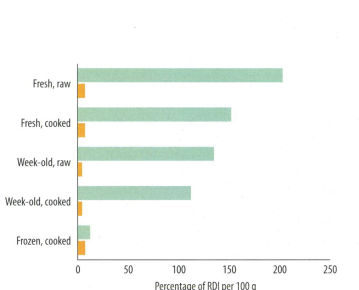
What's best? Fresh raw and canned carrots contained more beta-carotene than the other types, but for vitamin C there's little difference between fresh, frozen and canned carrots. You might prefer the flavour and texture of fresh.



BROCCOLI

Broccoli is a good source of vitamin C, but after a week in the fridge it had lost around one third. Frozen broccoli, though, had 92% less vitamin C than fresh.

What's best? (1) fresh; (2) frozen.



We retested the fresh vegies after storing them (uncooked) in the fridge for a week, and they lost nutritional value — especially the green vegetables (broccoli, spinach and beans).

◀ • **Lycopene** This is the red pigment in tomatoes; there's now good evidence that tomatoes help prevent heart disease and prostate cancer.

We tested the fresh vegies raw and cooked. Cooking makes vegetables more palatable for most people, but they always lose some nutrients — especially vitamin C. Microwave cooking or steaming retains more of the nutrients than boiling; we steamed the vegetables.

We also retested the fresh vegies after storing them (uncooked) for one week in the fridge (at 4°C). They lost nutritional value in this time — especially the green vegetables (broccoli, green beans and spinach). So unless you use up your fresh veg quickly you're better off with frozen. ■

Frozen and canned storage

Frozen vegies retain most of their nutritional value for up to a year if your freezer is at the right temperature (−18°C) but if it's not so cold (say −12°C) they lose quality much more rapidly. So check your freezer temperature.

When you're buying frozen veg avoid any that are iced together in clumps (they should be free-flowing), as this means they haven't been handled correctly during distribution. It's also a good idea to take your frozen food home in an Esky or cold bag, and get it into the freezer at home as soon as possible. Treat it as you would ice cream.

Canned vegetables also gradually lose their vitamins, even when stored under cool conditions; again, they shouldn't be stored for more than about a year. Unfortunately most canned food isn't required to have a best-before date so the only way to really keep track is to write the date on the can when you buy it — although you still won't know how long it was sitting on the shelf before that.

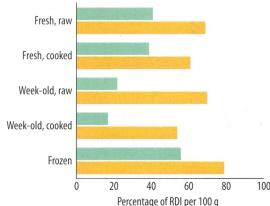


results

SPINACH

Spinach (that's English spinach, as opposed to silver beet) is an excellent source of vitamin C and beta-carotene. Frozen spinach had slightly more of both than cooked fresh spinach. And after a week in the fridge, the 'fresh' spinach had lost nearly half of its vitamin C.

What's best? (1) frozen; (2) fresh.



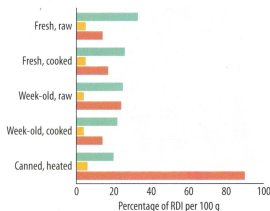
CANNED GREENER THAN FROZEN

When you use canned vegetables you use less energy and create fewer greenhouse gas emissions than when you use frozen veg. It takes more energy to make the can than the plastic or cardboard packaging, but frozen foods require more energy for processing and distribution.

TOMATOES

Canned tomatoes have a lot more lycopene than fresh, and only a little less vitamin C than cooked fresh tomatoes. They're usually canned in tomato juice, which boosts the lycopene content, and the varieties used for canning may have more lycopene than those grown for fresh tomatoes.

What's best? (1) canned; (2) fresh. Obviously this only applies to cooked tomatoes for pasta sauces, etc — we're not suggesting you use canned tomatoes in a salad.



■ Vitamin C ■ Beta-carotene ■ Lycopene

10 clean machines

test

Will a 'self-cleaning' oven save you mindless hours spent scrubbing, scourer in hand and cleaning fumes up your nose? And most importantly, will it also cook and grill your food to perfection? That's what our home economist set out to discover when putting 10 wall ovens, most of them with a self-cleaning function, through their paces.

Built-in wall ovens, unlike freestanding ranges where the oven and cooktop are combined, give you more flexibility in your kitchen layout — they don't have to be under your cooktop and can fit underneath your bench or in the wall. They can also be positioned at your preferred height for easier access.

The tested ovens, ranging in price from \$1499 to \$4799, were scored for their cooking and grilling capabilities (they all have an internal grill) and ease of use. We also assessed the 'self-cleaning' function. While most of the ovens fared relatively well in all categories, the MIELE was the leader of the pack, with a very good overall score of 89%. The ELECTROLUX Gallery was the lowest scorer in all categories, scoring just 67% overall.

Models on test

While we were interested in testing new self-cleaning 'pyrolytic' ovens, we didn't want to exclude any major brands, so have included in the test the ASKO, which has no self-cleaning function, and the BOSCH, which has self-cleaning catalytic liners instead of a pyrolytic function. These particular models were also chosen to let us check out their side-opening doors.

Like most ovens these days, those tested are electric and fan-forced. For some people, electric ovens may



WHAT TO BUY

MIELE H 4271 BP	\$2899
BLANCO BOSEP 168X	\$2299
BOSCH HBN53L550A	\$2399
FISHER & PAYEL Titan OS302M	\$4799

➔ BEST BUY

The extra-wide FISHER & PAYEL Titan got the same overall score (83%) as the BOSCH and BLANCO, so if you're looking for a wide oven you'd probably be happy with it. However, as we haven't compared it in tests with other wide ovens, we can't say how it would perform relative to them.

still have the outdated reputation for taking longer to cook food, but in fact these ovens are multifunctional, meaning you can use a combination of top and bottom elements and a fan to speed up cooking and give a uniform temperature.

We also included the extra-wide FISHER & PAYEL Titan oven in the test, as at the time we bought them it was the only model available from that brand with the pyrolytic self-cleaning function. At 76 cm, wide, it's about 16 cm wider than normal ovens (and about 10 cm higher).

Wide ovens are good for people who entertain a lot or have a large family and cook large batches regularly. The FISHER & PAYEL comes with three shelves and has 13 runner positions for multiple-shelf cooking. A larger oven also makes cooking at Christmas time simpler, accommodating the jumbo-sized turkey and all your vegetables as well. ➤

ELECTRIC WALL OVENS

IN A NUTSHELL

- 'Self-cleaning' does what it says, but you still have to do some of the work.
- All but one of the tested ovens performed well overall — only the Electrolux was a disappointment.



HOW WE TESTED

- The cooking score was based on five tests: scones to test evenness of cooking at high temperatures; sponge cakes to test the oven's ability to cook on multiple shelves; meringues to test its ability to cook at low temperatures; custard tart to test its ability to cook a combination food and its turn-down capacity; and roast chicken to test its ability to roast a whole food item.
- Our tester looked at grill performance, checking the evenness of toasted bread and the ability to cook sausages (a thicker food with a high fat content).
- To test ease of use of controls, she assessed how easy the

labelling, knobs, buttons and display panels are to use and understand.

- To test ease of use of the grill she checked whether it rolls out smoothly, supports a reasonable load, is stable and adjustable and that food on the tray doesn't touch the element. For the oven she looked at whether shelves roll out smoothly, don't tilt or pull right out, and whether it's easy to see the food inside.
- She rated cleaning based on a light clean using the pyrolytic function (if applicable), or a clean according to manufacturer's instructions.

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

While self-cleaning sounds luxurious, not all the hard work is done for you. Beforehand, all runners, shelves and other accessories need to be removed and cleaned separately, and you have to clean the inside of the window.

< Hassle-free cleaning?

When set on the pyrolytic cleaning mode, the oven heats up to around 500°C, converting food residues into ash, which you then wipe away. For safety reasons, the door automatically locks during the pyrolytic clean and is released only when the oven temperature falls below about 280°C. The outside of the oven gets much hotter than usual while cleaning, so it's advisable to keep children out of the kitchen during this process to prevent burns. Most of the ovens have a light-soil clean that takes 1.5–2 hours and a heavy-soil clean, which takes 2.5–3 hours.

While self-cleaning sounds luxurious, not all the hard work is done for you. Beforehand, all runners, shelves and other accessories need to be removed and cleaned separately, which can be difficult for some of the models. It's also advisable to clean off any coarse dirt beforehand, and thoroughly clean the inside glass. And of course afterwards you have to remove the ash from the oven.

So while you still have to get your hands dirty, the

upside is that the pyrolytic function is chemical-free and, in all the models tested, does thoroughly clean your oven, particularly in hard-to-reach places. We'd recommend it to anyone who can afford the luxury.

The BOSCH's self-cleaning surface is known as a catalytic liner. This microporous coating absorbs fat splatters while the oven is cooking. If the surface stops cleaning itself efficiently, it can be regenerated by heating the empty oven for an hour using the hot-air function. While the liners protect the walls from fat splashes, the doors, shelf supports, racks and floor still need to be cleaned regularly. If properly cared for, the liners should last a long time, but may eventually need replacing.

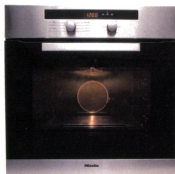
The only oven without any self-cleaning function, the ASKO, was tested for ease of cleaning as per its instruction manual and rated OK.

Which door to choose?

Both the ASKO and the BOSCH ovens have a side-opening door, which is especially useful if your oven

profiles

The models in the What to buy list are profiled in rank order.



MIELE H 4271 BP

Price \$2899

Usable oven space 43L

Good points

- Almost perfect oven cooking score of 98%.
- Excellent grill performance.
- Very easy to use, with excellent control labelling.
- Contains a smokeless grill tray, which traps the fat.
- Has a rapid heat-up function.
- Accompanied by a recipe book.

Bad points

- Only one shelf supplied (additional wire shelves can be bought for \$72.20 each).
- Narrow internally.



BEST BUY

BLANCO BOSEP 168X

Price \$2299

Usable oven space 50 L

Good points

- Excellent heat distribution and evenness whilst grilling.
- Very good oven cooking.
- The light globe is easy to replace.
- Very easy to clean. The pyrolytic function works well and the moulded runners are easy to clean.
- Protective shield in front of grill element.
- Among the widest internally.

Bad points

- Grill tray has no stoppers to prevent it being pulled all the way out.

is above bench height. It means you avoid having to lean over a hot oven door when taking out food. A side-opening door, when positioned at an appropriate height, is also more convenient for wheelchair users.

An oven with a side-opening door needs to be installed dead level, otherwise the door can swing back onto the user, perhaps resulting in a serious burn.

A downward opening door is more suitable for under-bench ovens, as the door prevents your legs coming in contact with the shelves at this level. Some people might also favour a downward-opening door as it can be used for resting plates and baking dishes on. >



about the rest

- The LG LB642058S has very good oven and grill performance, but only one shelf is supplied, and the shelves and grill tilt when pulled out, which may cause spillages (LG says it's addressed this since our test). The shelves can also be accidentally pulled right out and the runners can be quite difficult to remove.
- The AEG B9871-4M is excellent at grilling and very good for oven cooking but only scored a comparatively low 65% for ease of use — its shelves tilt and can be accidentally pulled right out, as can the grill tray.
- The SMEG SA130P has excellent oven cooking but also only scored 65% for ease of use due to poor visibility through the door, shelves that tilt and can be pulled right out, difficulty using the controls and difficulty comprehending function diagrams.
- The DELONGHI PMFPS60B has very good oven and grill scores but only has a small viewing area through the door and no protective shield on the grill element (which means it could be easy to burn your hand, particularly if the oven's under the bench).
- The ASKO O3A scored very well for grill and oven performance but is quite narrow internally and may not be able to fit larger baking trays.
- The ELECTROLUX GALLERY EOC 6800 X is the cheapest pyrolytic oven tested but got the lowest overall score. The shelves have an ineffective stopper to prevent them being pulled out, there's a small viewing area through the door, no protective shield in front of the grill element and the runners can be difficult to remove.



BOSCH HBN53L50A

Price \$2399 (This model will be discontinued in May 2007.)

Usable oven space 53 L

Good points

- Excellent at grilling.
- Very good oven cooking.
- Has catalytic liners on the walls of the oven, which continuously clean them.
- The runners are easy to remove for cleaning, and the oven floor is easy to clean.
- Has a smokeless grill tray.
- Protective shield in front of the grill element.
- Among the widest internally.
- Very easy-to-use controls.

Bad points

- Grill tray has no stoppers to prevent it being pulled all the way out.
- The shelves have a slight tilt when pulled out, which can cause dishes to slide.

Extra-wide oven



FISHER & PAYKEL Titan QS302M

Price \$4799

Usable oven space 84 L

Good points

- Very good oven and grill cooking.
- Has a smokeless grill tray.
- Extra-wide oven can accommodate multiple trays.
- Has 13 shelf positions.
- Shelves have no tilt.
- Blue enamel interior makes it easy to see food spills.
- Comes with a recipe book.

Bad points

- No protective shield in front of grill element.
- Grill tray sits on shelf and can slide as it's not stable.
- Large, bulky shelves can be difficult to clean in the kitchen sink.

A side-opening door is particularly useful if your oven is above bench height. It means you avoid having to lean over a hot oven door when taking out food, but you can't rest plates and baking dishes on it like a downward-opening door.

MODEL	PERFORMANCE					FUNCTIONS									
	Overall score (%)	Oven score (%)	Grill score (%)	Ease of use score (%)		Top and bottom element	Top and bottom elements plus fan	Bottom element only	Bottom element plus fan	Fan-forced	Rear plus bottom elements plus fan	Rear plus top and bottom elements plus fan	Top element only (not grill)	Grill	
Brand / model (in rank order)															
Miele H 4271 BP	89	98	93	80		✓				✓				✓	
Blanco BOSEP 168X	83	87	95	70		✓	✓		✓	✓				✓	
Bosch HBNS3LS50A (A)	83	86	90	75				✓		✓	✓			✓	
Fisher & Paykel Titan OS302M (B)	83	87	85	78		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
LG LB642058S (EM550SP)	80	89	83	70		✓	✓	✓		✓				✓	✓
AEG B9871-4M	79	86	90	65		✓				✓		✓		✓	✓
Smeg SA130P	79	93	83	65					✓					✓	
DeLonghi PMFPS60B	78	81	80	73		✓				✓				✓	
Asko O3A	77	85	80	68						✓				✓	✓
Electrolux Gallery EOC 6800 X	67	75	65	63		✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓

Tester's tips

- When shopping around, take your largest baking tray with you so you can find an oven that will fit it.
- To clean metal runners and shelves, soak them in warm water with either dishwasher detergent or washing powder.
- After a pyrolytic clean use a vacuum cleaner to remove the fine ash-like particles, then wipe out the oven with warm soapy water.
- When cleaning exterior stainless steel surfaces, it's best to clean small sections at a time to prevent streaking. Different types of stainless steel will clean best with different methods, so try:
 - Hot water and a microfibre cloth.
 - Vinegar and a paper towel.
 - Methylated spirits and a paper towel.
 - Orange-based all-purpose cleaner and a microfibre cloth.



what to look for

Door

- An oven door that's light and easy to open, and stays open in any position (without falling fully open or slamming shut). Make sure the hinges are in the right place for your kitchen.
- A large enough window for a clear view inside.

Inside

- Capacity — check inside for the usable space by measuring the inside of the oven, rather than going by the stated volume.
- An interior light — check that the bulb is easy to replace (we've come across ovens that need a service call).
- Shelves should have safety stops to prevent them being pulled out accidentally.
- A good range of shelf positions. Three or more shelves may be handy, especially if you often cook several items at the same time.
- Shelves that don't slope down when pulled out with the weight of a heavy dish on them, which may cause food to spill. If shelves do slope, a guard at the front will help stop dishes falling off, but may make it harder to slide heavy baking dishes in and out.
- Moulded runners rather than metal pull-out ones, as they're easier to clean.

Grill

- At least two grill tray heights.
- A smokeless grill tray that traps fat and grease below it, rather than a wire rack — important for ovens with an internal grill, to prevent spattering and smoking fat.
- A grill tray that's easy to slide in and out and comes out far enough to let you easily manipulate food at the back of the tray. Look for a safety stop mechanism to stop it pulling right out.
- A grill element that's set high into the ceiling or has a shield in front, so

FEATURES						SPECIFICATIONS						COSTS	
Timer	Clock	Shelves	Pyrolytic cleaning function	Self-cleaning liners	Smokeless grill tray	Door hinges	Usable oven volume (L)	Internal dimensions (mm, H x W x D)	External dimensions (mm, H x W x D)	Contact	Running costs (\$ / 10 years)	Price (\$)	
✓	✓	1 (C)			✓	Bottom	43	268 x 389 x 408	595 x 595 x 580	03 9764 7100	591	2899	
✓	✓	2				Bottom	50	296 x 439 x 382	590 x 590 x 580	02 95032888	584	2299	
✓	✓	2 (C)		✓	✓	Side	53	296 x 439 x 382	590 x 595 x 570	03 9538 8419	505	2399	
✓	✓	3 (C)	✓		✓	Bottom	84	356 x 578 x 409 (B)	690 x 760 x 590 (B)	02 8745 8236	830	4799 (B)	
✓	✓	1 (C)			✓	Bottom	59	313 x 454 x 418	585 x 595 x 580	02 8805 4000	562	2499	
✓	✓	1 (C)				Bottom	44	275 x 397 x 407	595 x 590 x 565	03 9577 7205	532	2999	
✓	✓	2	✓			Bottom	46	258 x 447 x 400	595 x 590 x 565	02 9384 5678	612	2190	
✓	✓	2	✓			Bottom	49	281 x 426 x 407	585 x 595 x 570	02 9503 3101	614	2299	
✓		2				Side	45	262 x 404 x 423	590 x 595 x 565	03 8551 2204	522	1499	
✓	✓	2 (C)	✓			Bottom	43	275 x 396 x 399	590 x 595 x 560	02 9717 2190	552	1899	

that it can't easily come into contact with your fingers. This is particularly important if you place the oven under the bench.

Oven and grill functions

According to CHOICE's home economist, the most useful heating methods are:

- Classic or base bake: This is where heat comes from the bottom element only. It's particularly recommended for getting crispy bases.
- Top and bottom elements ('conventional bake'): This is standard convection baking. It provides reasonably even heating, but tends to be slightly hotter towards the top, allowing food to brown on top. It's good for cooking foods such as cakes, roasts and casseroles.
- Fan-forced bake: Heat comes from an element at the back of the oven and is circulated by a fan surrounded by the element. The oven heats relatively quickly and efficiently, and heat is distributed evenly, which is helpful for multi-shelf cooking. It's similar to conventional bake but faster, with more even heat distribution.

Other ovens functions include

- Quick preheat: A setting that reduces the oven preheat time.
- Fan-assisted: The top and bottom elements of the oven are used, while a fan circulates heat. This can be useful for cooking on more than one shelf at once as it helps to distribute the hot air evenly.
- Rear and bottom elements plus fan: This gives a very even heat and can be useful for roasts. It's also good for cooking pizzas with a crispy base.
- Grill with fan: Can be used to cook chicken and other roasts or larger cuts of meat.
- Defrost: The fan operates without or on low heat, moving air around to help defrost food. However, to reduce the chance of bacteria growing at unsafe temperatures, we'd recommend defrosting food in the fridge or microwave.

For people with a disability

An occupational therapist from the Independent Living Centre (NSW) assessed the ovens with varying types of disability in mind. We've only included models from the *What to buy* list.

- For someone in a wheelchair, the BOSCH is worth looking at due to its easy-to-access side-opening door and ability to be wall-mounted.
- The BOSCH would also be suitable for someone with back pain, as no bending over is required when it's wall-mounted.
- For people with upper limb dysfunction, such as weakness or limited movement, the BOSCH is a good choice as the door is easy to open and close, the handle is easy to grip and the controls are simple.
- For someone with vision impairment, the BLANCO would be suitable as it has a tactile indicator to show the program most used and, once shown how to operate it, the user will be able to learn the desired position setting.
- For people with cognitive impairment, the MIELE is a good choice as it has an easy two-step process with basic controls that are easy to learn. The BLANCO is also simple to learn.

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Oven score: 30%
- Grill score: 30%
- Ease of use score: 40%

Functions See *What to look for*, left, for what the different combinations of elements are useful for.

Running costs over 10 years Based on running the oven 150°C above room temperature for two hours a day for 10 years at 15 cents per kWh.

Prices are recommended retail as of January 2007.

(A) To be discontinued in May 2007 but may still be available in some shops.

(B) This is an extra-wide oven — 760 mm rather than the more usual 590/595 mm. See Models on test, page 39, for more on this.

(C) You can buy extra shelves.

All-in-one printers

Printer, scanner, copier and even fax all in one box — how useful's that?

Combining a printer, scanner, copier and sometimes also a fax into a single box is a great idea if you're short of space. CHOICE Computer recently tested all-in-one printers and rated their printing, copying, scanning and faxing capabilities. The most expensive printer in the test outperformed the rest, but you can buy a functional printer for much less.

How good are they?

- **Printing** The top-performing model in the test printed almost as well as the best inkjet printer in our last test (CHOICE, November 2006).
- **Photo printing** is usually pretty slow and varies depending on the image source.
- **Scanning** Most of the printers were OK to good at scanning photos and documents; however, scanning thick objects like books can be problematic.
- **Copying** Most of the printers use their own controls for copying, which means you don't need to have the computer on to make a quick copy.
- **Scan to file** Optical character recognition (OCR) software converts printed characters into a file that you can use with a word processing program. Not all models have this feature.

- **Fax** If you need a fax, having one in your printer is very useful. All the tested printers with a fax function can store a fax in memory if there's no paper in the tray when it arrives, and you don't need to leave the computer on to receive and send.
- **Running costs** The cost of ink is a major factor in running these printers. The cheapest printer to buy isn't necessarily the cheapest to own because of the ongoing running costs. Differences could amount to over \$800 in three years in our scenario. The CANON Pixma MP530 is the cheapest to run, while the LEXMARK X3470 and BROTHER MFC-240C are the most expensive.

What to look for

- **Connections** All the models in this test connect to a computer via USB cable, and all except the HP Photosmart C4180 and C3180 allow direct printing from a digital camera using PictBridge (see right).
- **LCD** A liquid crystal display screen is particularly handy for printers that can print directly from digital memory cards. Some are small and only show the printer's status, others can preview the page.

- **Duplex printing** allows you to print on both sides of the paper. Only the CANON Pixma MP830 and MP530 printers have this built into the hardware so that the paper is flipped by the printer.

- **Paper capacity and trays** More is better. Although you're unlikely to be too bothered if you're at the machine when it runs out of paper, losing a fax because you weren't there to refill the paper tray when the memory was full can be very annoying. All can handle A4 as the maximum paper size.

- **PictBridge** allows digital cameras and printers to communicate. The printer and camera don't have to be of the same brand, but both must be PictBridge-compatible and they must be connected via a USB cable. Once connected, the camera can control the basic printer functions so you can print without a computer.

CHOICE Computer, March/April 2007, has the full test results and product specs, including scores for print quality, ink costs, copying, scanning and faxing. If you'd like to subscribe, go to choice.com.au/magazines or call 1800 069 552 toll-free. ■

ON TEST

(in rank order within groups)

With fax

- CANON Pixma MP830
- CANON Pixma MP530
- HP Officejet 6310
- LEXMARK X7350
- BROTHER MFC-240C

Without fax

- CANON Pixma MP160
- CANON Pixma MP460
- HP Photosmart C4180
- HP Photosmart C3180
- LEXMARK X2470
- LEXMARK X3470

WHAT TO BUY

With fax

CANON Pixma MP830	\$549
CANON Pixma MP530	\$399

The CANON Pixma MP830 is the best overall, but it's considerably more expensive to buy than the others in the test. If you're looking for a multifunction printer with a fax at a more modest price, the MP530 performs quite well and costs \$150 less to buy, as well as being the cheapest to run.

Without fax

CANON Pixma MP160	\$89
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Although it doesn't have an LCD for viewing images when printing directly from a digital camera, the CANON Pixma MP160 is worth considering as a budget model without a fax. It's cheap to buy and only a little more expensive to run than the MP530. The MP460 has more features and very similar scores, but will cost an extra \$90 to buy and isn't as cheap to run.



Canon Pixma MP830



Canon Pixma MP530



Canon Pixma MP160

Looking good



test

80 CM LCD TVs

They're sleek and stylish, outmoding bulky old-style televisions. A flat-screen TV has probably been on plenty of people's wish list for some time now, but high prices and teething problems with reception and ease of use have kept many of us out of the market.

In our latest round of tests we discovered that the picture quality of 80 cm LCD TVs has improved, they have more features and they're coming down in price. We were a lot tougher in our assessment of the TVs this time than in the past, and most models still came out looking good. All in all it seems that if you're in the market for an LCD TV now, you'll get a lot more bang for your buck.

On test were models under \$3000 from each of the major manufacturers that had a model available at the time we bought.

Tuning in

While all the TVs reviewed can receive digital TV either from an inbuilt tuner (in all but two models) or via the connection of a set-top box, not everyone will be able to get it. Plenty of areas still don't have great coverage, and if you live in an apartment block it might not be set up to receive digital TV, even if you are.

If you can't get it in your area or still have poor-quality reception after checking your antenna and other obvious problem spots, it might be time to contact your local MP to lobby for better coverage in your local area.

For more information on digital broadcasting and reception updates, check out the Digital Broadcasting Authority at www.dba.org.au. Also see *Digital do-it-all*, page 48.

How long will it last?

LCD TVs work using a backlight or 'lamp' that should last between 30,000 and 50,000 hours, depending on the model. That works out as about 16–27 years if you watch TV for five hours a day. When the lamp runs out, manufacturers say a replacement lamp can be purchased and installed, extending the lifespan of your TV. However, whether manufacturers will continue to stock replacement lamps for each specific model years down the track remains to be seen. >



HOW WE TESTED

- To check the picture and colour our testers set up all nine TVs close together and adjusted their controls to get the best picture possible. They kept the lighting in the room low and the sound muted, and four experts watched a variety of footage (from various movies and live TV) simultaneously on all the tested screens. They evaluated the picture quality and rated it out of 10.
- Testers checked how well each TV produces accurate colour, using a specially calibrated high-quality monitor as a reference.
- They displayed a number of test patterns from a high-quality DVD player, to measure if any picture was being cut off at the edges and/or any apparent distortions (such as circles that aren't round, or wavy lines that should be straight).
- They played movies and other footage to check the screens' ability to produce images without colour banding, jerkiness, blurring, vibration and colours bleeding in high contrast or very intensely saturated parts of the image. They also checked there were no trails behind fast-moving objects on the screen.
- They measured each TV's sound to see if there were any obvious gaps in its ability to produce sounds in the audible range, and listened to both music and movies to check for rattles, hums, hissing or distortion, as well as making a judgment on how well the high and low sounds were produced.
- To see how easy the TVs are to operate, testers used the remote control, front panel controls and onscreen display to perform a number of common tasks. They looked for clear labelling, buttons and controls that are easily identified and can be used without interfering with other controls, and logical menus.
- Finally they used a power meter to measure the power the TV uses in standby mode.



WHAT TO BUY

PANASONIC Viera TX-32LXD600A	\$2199
SONY Bravia KDL-32V2000	\$2699
LG 32LC2D	BEST BUY \$1999

IN A NUTSHELL

- The overall standard of LCD TVs is improving. We toughened up our assessment this time and nearly all the TVs in this test outperformed previously tested models.
- Manufacturers are including handy features such as a hard disc recorder for easy recording. And many models now have an inbuilt digital tuner, which means you don't need to buy a set-top box in order to pick up digital TV.

For most people it won't matter yet whether the built-in digital tuner is standard or high-definition, as there's not a lot of HD TV being broadcast. There'll be more in future, though, so an HD tuner gives you better long-term options.



profiles

The models in the What to buy lists are profiled in rank order.



PANASONIC Viera TX-32LXD600A

Price \$2199

Good points

- Very good picture quality.
- Good sound quality.
- Uses very little energy on standby.
- The remote control is large, with easy-to-operate keys for the channel and volume controls.
- Inbuilt high-definition digital TV tuner.
- The remote control will also control a PANASONIC DVD player.
- The TV has a swivel base for flexible viewing.
- Two HDMI connections.
- SD card reader, which means you can show digital photos on the screen.

Bad points

- The edges of the image are trimmed to the point that some of the outer portions are lost.
- No 'on' timer.



SONY Bravia KDL-32V2000

Price \$2699

Good points

- Very good picture quality.
- Uses very little energy on standby.
- Inbuilt high-definition digital TV tuner.
- Swivel base for flexible viewing.
- HDMI connection.

Bad points

- The 'picture-in-picture' capability (which normally lets you check what's happening on another channel in a small picture in the corner of the screen) is limited to digital channels of the same channel group. (So, for example, you could watch Channel Seven and pull up the Seven program guide but not the guide to another channel.)
- The onboard controls are on top of the set — they could be difficult to reach if you hang the TV on the wall.



LG 32LC2D

Price \$1999

Good points

- Very good picture quality.
- The remote control can also control a DVD player, for both LG and other brands.
- Inbuilt high-definition digital TV tuner.
- HDMI connection.

Bad points

- No socket for headphones.



about the rest

- While the SHARP, TOSHIBA and PHILIPS rated well for picture quality, all three only scored only 52% for sound. However, if you plan to connect them to your hi-fi sound system they're worth considering. The TOSHIBA and PHILIPS don't have a digital tuner, though.
- The NEC has a slight greenish cast to the picture, and our testers found there was noticeable blurring and trailing of fast-moving objects on the screen. On the positive side it's easy to use.
- Our testers rated the sound quality of the SAMSUNG as the worst of all the nine models tested, and found a poor level of detail when viewing dark scenes.
- The HUMAX also has some blurring and trailing of fast-moving objects on the screen, a poor level of detail in dark scenes and the picture has unnatural colours; it also scored only 50% for sound. However, it has an inbuilt hard disc recorder, which means you can record shows and timeshift without buying a separate video recorder.

MODEL	PERFORMANCE				
	Overall score (%)	Picture quality score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Standby energy score (%)
Brand / model (in rank order)					
Panasonic Viera TX-32LXD600A	81	85	74	69	100
Sony Bravia KDL-32V2000	77	82	66	65	100
LG 32LC2D	75	81	59	66	90
Sharp Aquos LC-32BD6X	73	86	52	55	90
Toshiba Regza 32WL66A	73	80	52	66	90
Philips 32PF7321/79	67	74	52	54	90
NEC NL-32HDB2	63	65	47	70	70
Samsung LA32R718D	60	60	43	60	90
Humax LAU-32TPVR	58	54	50	68	70



- Check how the picture looks if you step to the side or move up and down. Viewing angles have improved in the newer models, but some still have a dimmer picture when viewed from different angles — important if several people are watching the TV at once.
- Try to watch a variety of TV programs in the shop. In particular, look for natural skin tones on a person in a studio setting, such as a news presenter.
- Also check the picture for a 'colour cast', such as a pinkish or greenish tinge that can't be completely fixed by adjusting the controls.
- Check for a built-in digital tuner so you don't have to buy a set-top box as well in order to receive digital TV. For most people it won't matter whether it's standard-definition (SD) or high-definition (HD) at the moment, as there's not a lot of HD TV being broadcast. There'll be more in future, though, so an HD tuner gives you better long-term options. There's no point buying an HD tuner if the screen is only SD, but all the screens of the tested TVs are high-definition.
- If you're likely to lose the remote control, choose a TV with easily accessible controls on the TV itself. A number of models in the test have the volume and channel controls on top of the TV, making them difficult to reach if it's mounted on the wall.
- Look for sockets that allow you easy access to the connections for DVD players, cable TV, etc.
- Check that the connections on the TV match the ones on the devices you want to hook up to it (such as DVD player/recorder, cable TV, games console, etc), and that there are enough connections for all the devices you want to attach at the same time. HDMI (high-definition multimedia interface)

is an all-digital connection for both sound and video in one cable. You may not have any gadgets with HDMI output at the moment but we expect more to use them in the future, so it might be worth looking out for a TV with at least one HDMI socket. For more information on TV connections, go to choice.com.au, type 'LCD TV' into the search box and click on 'Buying Guide: LCD TV'.



If you want to use your TV as a computer display, you'll need one with a DVI input for newer computers or a VGA input for older ones. An HDMI socket will do if your computer has an HDMI output, but not many do at the moment.

FEATURES				SPECIFICATIONS			
disc recorder	Secure Digital (SD) card reader	DVI / HDMI connection		Tuner type	Claimed resolution (pixels)	Dimensions with base attached (cm, H x W x D)	Contact
	✓	0 / 2		A, HD	1366 x 768	62.5 x 86 x 30	132 600, www.panasonic.com.au
		0 / 1		A, HD	1366 x 768	59.5 x 79 x 22	1300 137 669, www.sony.com.au
		0 / 1		A, HD	1366 x 768	63 x 81 x 23.5	1800 725 375, www.lge.com.au
		0 / 1		A, HD	1366 x 768	58.5 x 97 x 31	1300 135 022, www.sharp.net.au
		0 / 1		A	1366 x 768	61.5 x 79.5 x 30	1800 505 051, www.castel.com.au
		0 / 2		A	1366 x 768	56.5 x 93.5 x 22.5	1300 651 993, www.philips.com.au
		0 / 1		A, HD	1366 x 768	64 x 80.5 x 21.5	131 632, www.nec.com.au
		0 / 1		A, HD	1360 x 768	60.5 x 80 x 25.5	1300 369 600, www.samsung.com.au
		1 / 0		A, SD	1280 x 768	60.5 x 83 x 22	1800 613 011, www.humaxdigital.com/australia
							1999

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is a combination of:

- Picture quality: 50%
- Sound quality: 20%
- Ease of use: 20%
- Energy consumption on standby: 10%

DVD/HDMI See *What to look for*, above.

Tuner type See *What to look for* for more. If there's only an analogue tuner you'll need to buy a set-top box to receive digital TV.

- **A:** Analogue.
- **SD:** Standard-definition digital.
- **HD:** High-definition digital.

Claimed resolution All these TVs have a high-definition screen.

Price Recommended retail, as supplied by manufacturers in February 2007.

Do-it-all for digital TVs

IN A NUTSHELL

- Having one machine that combines a DVD recorder, hard disc recorder and digital TV tuner keeps the home entertainment clutter to a minimum.
- Digital TV reception for these models is good under ideal conditions, but some models work better than others in marginal reception situations.

Considering Australia's reputation for adopting new technologies, its uptake of digital TV has been surprisingly subdued since services started in 2001. A switchover from the current analogue system was scheduled for 2008, but has been extended to some time between 2010 and 2012. After that, unless your TV has a digital tuner or you've bought a digital set-top box, you'll be sitting in your lounge room watching a whole lot of nothing.

You'll still want to record from the TV too. A so-called DVD/PVR gives you much more flexibility than a traditional video recorder, letting you record either to a DVD or an internal hard disc drive (otherwise known as a personal video recorder — hence PVR). Adding a digital TV tuner in the same box will allow you to enjoy a high-quality TV picture and recording long after the current analogue TV system is switched off.

Digital TV comes in two forms — standard definition (SD) and high definition (HD). SD TV is delivered at a resolution of 576i — the 'i' stands for 'interlaced' horizontal lines and refers to a process where every alternate line is newly displayed (1, 3, 5 ... then 2, 4, 6). The picture appears smooth because the screen is fully refreshed at least 25 times a second, which is too fast for you to see the interlacing. An SD digital tuner can show all the TV you currently watch on analogue free-to-air networks, as well as additional digital TV channels such as ABC2, SBS2 and a number of digital radio channels.

The Federal Government has mandated that HD deliver a minimum resolution of 576p, which consists of 576 horizontal lines progressively scanned (in one pass rather than interlaced) across the screen 25 times every second. HD can also accommodate the higher 720p and 1080i resolution formats.

Unfortunately HD television content is currently little more than the 20 hours per week stipulated by government regulations, in the state capital cities and some regional areas. It mainly consists of daytime TV shows, nightly news and the occasional locally produced drama such as *Blue Heelers*.

All the DVD/PVRs tested have an SD digital tuner, and they can all play movie DVDs and audio CDs as well as record digital TV shows to the internal hard drive. All except the PHILIPS can also record TV shows direct to a DVD and play DivX video.

If you're recording a TV show with one of these models and want to watch a different channel at the same time, you have a couple of options. You can use the analogue tuner in your current TV to watch the channel you're not recording, but this seems to defeat the purpose of having digital TV in the first place. Also, it won't be an option when the analogue signal is switched off. The long-term option is to get a built-in digital tuner when buying your next LCD or plasma TV, as most models now come with an inbuilt digital tuner as standard.



what to buy

LG DBRH197

Price \$749

The LG performed strongly across the three main areas of digital TV reception, recording to the hard drive and playing DVDs. The overall ease of use score also makes it a good choice for users who may be intimidated by the prospect of several new technologies in one box.

Good points

- Easy-to-use menus and excellent onscreen display.
- Very easy to set up and tune stations.
- Good digital reception, particularly in an area with weak signals.
- Very easy to set up timer recordings.
- Very good performance on DVD playback with damaged discs.
- Very good remote control.
- HDMI output (see *Video connections*, page 51).

Bad points

- Poor standby energy score.
- Won't play DVDs from all regions.
- No S-video output.



PHOTOS: GENE PRODS



Digital vs analogue

An analogue television holds onto a signal even when reception deteriorates, attracting more and more 'noise' until it becomes unwatchable. We've all seen the ghosting that can occur on a TV picture in a poor reception area.

A digital transmission remains clear even when reception begins to deteriorate, until the picture suffers a dramatic drop in quality before failing altogether. This point is known as the digital cliff or threshold. Your existing aerial, cabling and physical surroundings will make a difference (unless you're simply in an area with no digital reception) but essentially it won't be a matter of whether you get good digital TV reception or bad, but whether you get good digital TV reception or nothing at all.

We tested the models for various signal strengths and while most performed well in a range of reception tests, the PANASONIC and DGTEC weren't as good in tests where the signal was less than ideal.

Digital TV in apartments

Many apartment owners/renters will be aware of the hassles involved in getting access to a pay TV service such as Foxtel or Optus TV in their units. Meetings with the owners' corporation or fellow apartment occupants to work out what's needed seem to quickly escalate into a major operation, and a similarly tortuous path may be part of your move to digital TV.

While some antenna systems will escape with just a small adjustment, many installations will require significant refurbishment, depending on the quality of the existing cabling and antenna.

If your apartment block hasn't moved over to digital TV, you may want to avoid the SONY, as it's the only model tested without an analogue tuner as well as an SD tuner. This means that you can't use it to receive the old analogue TV signal while you wait for your block of units to upgrade their antenna system. >



HOW WE TESTED

- Our testers checked the SD digital tuner on all the models for reception performance in areas with a good-quality signal, as well as for areas where reception was less than ideal.
- They also tested the performance of each model where reception might be affected by things such as a dryer or vacuum cleaner operating in the house.
- To discover how well these models performed as a DVD player and recorder, they tested how well they played an industry-standard error correction test disc, as well as a scratched DVD, typical of a disc you might get from a rental shop or one of your own DVD movies you watch often. If you have kids, you know their favourite DVD movies will be viewed many times and so you want to choose a model that isn't too sensitive to a DVD with a couple of scratches.
- They also tested how easy it is to navigate through the recorded programs, investigating things such as the ability to rename a recorded program.
- For a full list of factors included in the scoring, see *Using the table*, page S1.



about the rest

- The SONY has good scores for low energy use while on standby and overall digital TV reception, but the lack of an analogue receiver may be an issue if your home's in an area (or apartment block) that can't receive digital TV yet. The somewhat confusing remote control and a delay in reactivating the timeshift feature was also frustrating.
- If you live in a valley or marginal reception area and have an old antenna or low-quality cabling throughout your home, give the DGTEC a wide berth. In addition to achieving the worst digital reception score, it was also the worst performer in the damaged DVD test.
- The PANASONIC has the equal worst standby power score and the second-worst score for playback and digital reception, but we rated it as very easy to use, with an excellent remote control and onscreen display. So if you don't mind paying more every year to run your machine and live in a strong reception area, you could consider it.
- All the models include a 160 GB hard drive, except for the PHILIPS with 400 GB. Everything about the PHILIPS is big — its dimensions, its price and its weight. It also lacks an intuitive menu and navigation system, which makes it unnecessarily difficult to operate, and its remote control is long and heavy, with most keys the same size and colour. It has a good timeshift function, though (see *What to look for*, page S0).

Come 2010–2012, analogue broadcasting will be switched off. After that, unless your TV has a digital tuner or you've bought a digital set-top box, you'll be sitting in your lounge room watching a whole lot of nothing.

MODEL	PERFORMANCE				FEATURES					SPECIFICATIONS	
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Playback and digital reception score (%)	Standby energy score (%)	Can also receive analogue TV	Can record TV direct to DVD	Plays DVD regions	Plays DivX		Maximum claimed recording hours (hard disc)	Hard disc capacity (GB)
LG DBRH197	74	78	77	40	✓	✓	2, 3, 4	✓		233	160
Sony RDR-HXD760	71	69	73	70		✓	All	✓		249	160
DGTEC DG-SD160DVR	69	72	65	70	✓	✓	All	✓		204	160
Panasonic DMR-EX75	69	80	66	30	✓	✓	All	✓		284	160
Philips DVDR9000H/75	63	61	74	30	✓		2, 3, 4			650	400



what to look for

Remote control

A good remote control is crucial when operating a device that performs as many tasks as a DVD/PVR — particularly since most of the models on test make it difficult to perform all but the simplest actions using the front panel buttons.

Remote controls should have buttons that are sized, shaped and spaced so you can easily find and press them individually. They should also be grouped according to function and the most commonly used buttons should be prominent.

Timeshift

A timeshift feature, where the hard drive records what you're watching on TV, is included on all the models and is a great way to watch what you want, when you want it. For example, you can use timeshift as an instant replay, so if you've missed a crucial scene in a movie or live sporting event, hit the back button and watch the missed footage, then fast forward when a commercial break comes on and you don't miss a thing.

The PHILIPS is unique among the models tested in that it's always set to record while you're watching TV, so pausing and resuming is a very simple process.

DVD performance

The PHILIPS and LG were very good in our damaged DVD performance test, making either of them a good choice for anyone who rents a lot of DVD movies or owners of a large collection of kids' DVD titles that are watched repeatedly and handled by grubby little hands.

Lack of multi-region support in the PHILIPS and LG models is frustrating when you consider the other three models play DVD discs from all regions. In many cases machines can be altered to play DVDs from all regions

The Panasonic (right) remote's large, clearly labelled buttons make it more intuitive to use than the Sony's (far right) small, closely spaced keys.



through a simple code input on the remote control. However, customers forking out several hundred dollars don't need the added hassle to enable a feature that should be available out of the box.

Inputs

Additional input options allow other products such as a digital still camera or digital video (DV) camera to download photos or home movies either to the hard drive or straight to a DVD. All the models have a firewire/DV connection, which is a handy feature if you want to edit your video using a DV camera.

The PANASONIC includes an SD memory card reader on the front panel, where you can insert an SD card from a digital camera or other device and transfer the data to the hard drive or to a DVD.

The DGTEC has a USB input, which is a handy feature if you want to connect something like a flash memory drive or digital camera to transfer files to the hard drive or a DVD. However, the interface is cumbersome and provides only limited editing and viewing controls.



(cm, H x W x D)	Weight (kg)	Contact	Price (\$)
43 x 34	4.4	www.lg.com.au	749
43 x 33	4.5	www.sony.com.au	899
43 x 31.5	4.1	www.dgtec.com.au	599
43 x 33	4.3	www.panasonic.com.au	879
43.5 x 36	7.3	www.philips.com.au	1370

Format follies

Most DVD recorders are adopting a 'do it all' approach, so you won't have too many problems when recording or playing a DVD, regardless of the format. However, the PANASONIC is the only model that supports DVD-RAM and also has the best range of support for the other DVD formats. All the models can use DVD+R and -R as well as the rewritable DVD+RW and -RW discs.

All except the DGTEC support at least one of the recently introduced dual-layer disc formats, which provide double the storage capacity of standard DVDs. The LG, PHILIPS and SONY only can use DVD+R DL, while the PANASONIC supports both +R and -R.

What about Blu-ray and HD DVD?

You may be hearing about Blu-ray and HD DVD, which are two new non-compatible recordable disc formats. They have the same physical size as a DVD and can hold around 10 times more data on each disc. But if you tend to record more to the internal hard drive and just record the occasional video to DVD, don't bother buying one of these recorders until more movies come out on Blu-ray and HD DVD and the recordable discs become more affordable — and, hopefully, the format war has been decided.

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Ease of use score: 50%
- Playback and digital reception score: 40%
- Standby energy score: 10%

Ease of use score is made up of:

- Remote control: 25%
- Recording direct to the hard disc drive (HDD): 20%
- Recordings management on the HDD: 10%
- Onscreen display (including whether onscreen menus are simple and well-organised): 10%
- Front panel controls and display (including location and ease of access): 10%
- Copying from HDD to DVD: 7%
- Tuning and setting up channels: 5%
- Recording direct to DVD: 5%
- User manual: 5%
- Copying from DVD to HDD: 3%

Playback and digital reception score is made up of:

- Playback quality: 45%
- Reception: 45%
- Faulty DVD: 10%

Standby energy score This looks at the energy used when the DVD/PVR is turned off but can be turned on by

the remote. The lower the usage, the higher the score.

Can also receive analogue TV Indicates whether the DVD/PVR has an analogue as well as a digital tuner, allowing the user to receive either an analogue or a digital TV signal. This is not to be confused with a twin digital tuner, where the user can record one digital TV show while watching another. None of these models has twin tuners.

Plays DVD regions We tested for the ability of each model to play DVD movie titles from the different region codes. Australia is part of region 4; region 2 includes the Middle East, Europe and Japan, while region 3 covers Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan (the USA is in region 1).

Plays DivX DivX is a compressed video file based on the MPEG-4 video format. It's a popular file choice for videos downloaded over the web due to its ability to keep video at a high quality despite small file sizes.

Maximum claimed recording hours The manufacturers' claimed maximum hours of possible recording on the hard drive. In normal use this time will vary depending on the type of material being recorded. Usually detailed or fast-moving scenes require more space.

Video connections

Here's a guide to some different kinds of video connection and what they're used for (note that, apart from SCART and HDMI, they all require separate audio connections):

- **Composite** is found on most modern TVs. The brightness and colour signals are combined into the single video signal. All the tested models have composite input and output.
- **S-video** is identifiable by a small, round, four-pin plug. It provides better picture quality than composite because the brightness and colour signals are kept separate. All except the DGTEC have an S-video input, while all except the LG have an S-video output.
- **Component** separates the picture even further into brightness and individual colour signals, providing even better quality. Three video cables are required. All the models tested have component output, but no input.
- **Digital video (DV)**, also known as firewire, allows video to be transferred from a digital camcorder to a hard drive or direct to a DVD. All the models have this facility as an input.
- **HDMI** (high-definition multimedia interface) is an all-digital connection for both video and sound in one cable. All except the SONY and DGTEC have an HDMI connection.
- **SCART** is also known as a Euroconnector. It's a 21-pin connector for analogue video and sound. The PHILIPS has both SCART input and output while the PANASONIC only has SCART output.

For strolling (not jogging!)

Three-wheel strollers certainly aren't losing popularity with today's wave of health-conscious parents. The convenience of being able to take bub along on the morning run is a major selling point, and their seemingly 'rugged' stability and stylish looks also widen their appeal. But despite the general perception that three-wheel strollers are suitable for jogging, less than half the manufacturers of the 11 tested models recommended jogging with them — and we found that testing at a faster speed was when things started to come apart for some models.

We put the strollers, ranging in price from \$289 to \$550, through vigorous tests to establish their safety and durability in accordance with the Australian standard. As with previous tests of three-wheel strollers, rather than test for durability running at 5 km/h for 64 hours on the 'rolling road' rig, which is the standard, we tested them at 10 km/h, to simulate the action of jogging.

The rolling road rig is a conveyor belt with pieces of metal fixed across it at regular intervals and which runs underneath the strollers while they're fixed to the rig. It simulates rolling the stroller over slightly bumpy roads.

Durability test: failed

The CHILDCARE, JEEP and STEELCRAFT failed the durability test.

- The front wheel of the CHILDCARE broke off after 1.5 hours (see the photo on page 55).

- The JEEP suffered a cracked front wheel support after 64 hours.

- The spokes on the front wheel of the STEELCRAFT broke, puncturing the tyre tube, after 57 hours.

The HOLDEN developed a loose front wheel during the test, but still met the standard's requirements.

To ensure we hadn't simply bought bad samples, we repurchased and tested each of the strollers that failed a second time. The CHILDCARE and the JEEP suffered the same failures again after 5.5 hours and 28 hours respectively, while the STEELCRAFT suffered a different fault, with a support rivet breaking after 40 hours.

The first time we tested the BERTINI, a rivet supporting the main frame broke after 19.5 hours. The retested stroller suffered no such breakages, and our testers concluded that our first sample was probably faulty.

Safety test: failed

Five of the tested strollers failed various forms of safety testing based on the standard. The BAMBINO, HOLDEN, JEEP and VALCO failed the foot openings test, as all have the risk of a child's head becoming trapped between the bumper bar or tray and the seat if the child slips forward.

The BOB stroller failed the head barrier test, as there's a possibility for the child to slip backwards through the press-studded cover when the stroller is reclined. The manufacturer told us the new version of the BOB stroller (due to be released mid 2007) has a permanent head barrier to fix this problem. >

IN A NUTSHELL

- Four strollers failed a safety test, two a durability test, and one failed both.
- They may be perceived as 'jogger' strollers but only five of the manufacturers recommend jogging with them.



HOW WE TESTED

- To test **safety** as recommended by the standard, our testers checked that the straps are of adequate length and width, that the child is securely retained and that there are no possible entrapments or sharp edges. They also tested the stability of the stroller and that the brakes work well.
- To test **ease of use**, our testers checked adjustments, such as reclining functions and the safety harness, and various activities, such as loading and unloading the basket, using the brakes and locking the swivel of the front wheel. They also folded and unfolded the strollers, took them over rough terrain, up and down stairs and through doorways, and tested how easily they fit into the boot of a family-sized car.
- To test **durability**, the testers put the strollers on our 'rolling road' rig for 64 hours at a speed of 10 km/h (see above left for more on this). They also tested them on a machine that continuously simulates the action of mounting a kerb.



what to buy

These four strollers passed all our safety and durability tests.



SWALLOW BEEMA

Price \$299

Good points

- Easy to unfold.
- Easy recline adjustment.
- Fits easily into the boot of a family-sized car.

Bad points

- Fold lock is difficult to use.



MOTHER'S CHOICE MARINE

Price \$299

Discontinued but may still be available in some shops.

Good points

- Easy to fold and unfold.
- Easy recline adjustment.
- Fits easily into the boot of a family-sized car.

Bad points

- Restricted access to the parcel tray when the seat is fully reclined.
- The adjustable handle wobbles when locked into place.
- The tyre valve is hard to reach.



BERTINI MOONLIGHT

Price \$399

Discontinued but may still be available in some shops.

Good points

- Easy to fold and unfold.
- Easy recline adjustment.
- Fits easily into the boot of a family-sized car.

Bad points

- Restricted access to the parcel tray when the seat is fully reclined.
- The adjustment handle wobbles when locked into place.
- The tyre valve is hard to reach.



BABYLOVE TRI ACTIVE BL9006

Price \$349

Good points

- Easy to unfold.
- Fits easily into the boot of a family-sized car.

Bad points

- Zip operation for recline adjustment is harder to operate than other methods.
- Restricted access to the parcel tray when the seat is fully reclined.
- Recessed brake pedal could be confused with the folding pedal.
- Folding requires the use of both hands and feet.



about the rest

For the models that didn't make it into the *What to buy* list due to a failure of a safety or durability test (or both), some other considerations include:

- The STEELCRAFT Terrain Deluxe isn't easy to fit in the boot of a family-sized car but is otherwise fairly easy to use.
- The CHILDCARE Trilogy is also fairly easy to use, though you have to fiddle with zips to recline the seat and it's hard to reach into the parcel tray when the seat's fully reclined.
- The BOB Revolution has the highest ease of use score, but at \$549 is one of the more expensive strollers.
- The HOLDEN Range 1 is fairly easy to use, but folding it requires the use of your feet as well as hands, and it's hard to reach the tyre valve when inflating the tyres.

- The BAMBINO Kanga Sport Jogger is fairly easy to use, though you have to fiddle with zips to recline the seat and it's hard to reach into the parcel tray when the seat's fully reclined.
- The VALCO Runabout Tri-Mode got the lowest ease of use score, yet costs \$550. To recline the seat you have to fiddle with zips and folding requires the use of both hands and feet.
- The JEEP Liberty has the second-highest ease of use score, with the only disadvantage being that it's difficult to fit into the boot of a family-sized car. Your child would probably love it because it comes with a toy and speakers but unfortunately it failed both a safety and a durability test.

Despite the general perception that three-wheel strollers are suitable for jogging, less than half the manufacturers of the tested models recommend jogging with them — and we found testing them at a faster speed was when things started to come apart for some models.

MODEL	SCORE	FEATURES					SPECIFICATIONS			
Brand / model (in ease of use order within groups)	Ease of use score (%)	Jogging	Rain cover	Insect cover	Leg cover	Leash	Dimensions, folded (cm, H x W x D)	Weight (kg)	Contact	Price (\$)
Passed all tests										
Swallow Beema	70	ns			✓	✓	56 x 60.5 x 82.5	14	03 97643333	299
Mother's Choice Marine (A)	68		✓		✓		45.5 x 69 x 83	13	1800 809 526	299
Bertini Moonlight (A)	66		✓	✓	✓		39 x 68.5 x 85	14	1800 809 526	399
Babylove Tri Active BL9006	65				✓		60 x 67 x 80	12	www.babylove.com.au	349
Not recommended: failed durability test										
Steelcraft Terrain Deluxe 36819 (A)	69	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	49 x 65 x 90	12	1300 303 330	289
Childcare Trilogy 013700-080	67		✓		✓	✓	43 x 70 x 89	13	www.childcareproducts.com.au	370
Not recommended: failed safety test										
Bob Revolution (A)	72	✓				✓	39 x 58 x 98	11	www.bobgear.com	549
Holden Range 1 004338 (A)	69	✓	✓		✓	✓	42 x 60 x 86	13	1800 809 526	299
Bambino Kanga SportJogger (B)	68	✓	✓				35.5 x 65 x 89	13	1300 306 628	399
Valco Runabout Tri-Mode (A)	64	✓	✓			✓	40.5 x 68 x 83.5	13	www.valco.com.au	550
Not recommended: failed both tests										
Jeep Liberty Limited Urban Terrain (B)	71		✓		✓		59 x 65 x 81	14	1300 885 337	379

The runt of the litter?

The QUINNY Zapp, a lightweight, easily manoeuvrable three-wheeler, was also included in this test. Our testers concluded it was unsuitable for jogging and tested it at 5 km/h on the rolling road rig. It suffered no breakages at this speed.

What concerned us most about the QUINNY was its tendency to tip backwards when on a slope. The stroller's distributor showed us a test certificate saying it passes the Australian standard for stability, but our testing experience shows that it's borderline. It's particularly likely to tip if you put any extra weight on the handles.

It scored equal-second highest for ease of use (71%), but at \$399, there are cheaper, and sturdier, options available.



what to look for

- **Size** Measure the stroller to make sure it fits into your car boot without needing the wheels removed.
- **Folding and unfolding** Try folding and erecting it in the shop and see if you can carry it comfortably.

Safety features

- **Brakes** The effectiveness of the brakes and their engagement is vital. Look for brakes on both rear wheels that are foot-operated and linked, so the left and right brakes can be activated by a single action rather than applied individually. Get an idea of how well they work by applying the brakes and then trying to push the handle. Check that they actively lock into position. Foot-operated brakes mean you don't have to bend down, but make sure you can reach them easily.
- **Harness** A five-point harness consisting of two shoulder straps (attached to the backrest at shoulder level), a waist strap and a crotch strap. The waist straps in particular should be securely linked to the stroller's frame, so that the child can't lean out and tilt the stroller. Give the harness a tug to

USING THE TABLE

Safety and durability tests received only a pass or fail.

Score The ease of use score is made up of:

- Various adjustments (eg safety harness, seat recline): 25%
- Loading and unloading the basket, using the swivel wheel lock, applying and releasing the brakes: 25%
- Manoeuvring through doorways, up and down stairs, turning a tight corner, over rough terrain: 25%
- Unfolding, folding and carrying (including fitting into a car boot): 25%

Features See *What to look for*, below, for more.

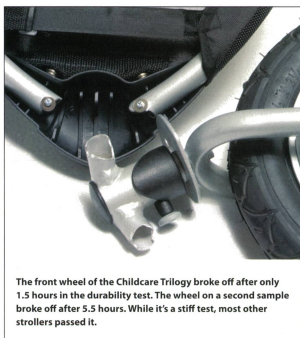
Price Prices are recommended retail as of January and February 2007 or what we paid in October 2006.

All the strollers have a shopping basket (some with extra pockets), reclining back, lockable front wheels, pneumatic tyres and a protective retractable hood.

ns. Not stated.

(A) Discontinued, but might be available in some shops.

(B) To be discontinued in June 2007.



The front wheel of the Childcare Trilogy broke off after only 1.5 hours in the durability test. The wheel on a second sample broke off after 5.5 hours. While it's a stiff test, most other strollers passed it.

Stroller safety

- Never leave your child unattended in a stroller.
- Always engage the brake when the stroller is standing, to prevent it from rolling.
- Use a lift where possible, but if you have to use the stairs, take the baby out of the stroller.
- When at a train station, park the stroller parallel to the tracks and travel in the carriage near the guard so they can make sure you've safely boarded or alighted.
- When jogging, always lock the front wheel into place to prevent it swivelling.

check the seat doesn't pull away from the frame. The straps should be adjustable (allowing for growth) and the buckles easy to use (for you, but not your child).

- **Wheels** Front wheels that swivel to make manoeuvring easier, and that can also be locked in the forward direction when travelling at higher speeds or over rough terrain. Large ones tend to be better on kerbs and stairs; pneumatic (inflatable) ones can puncture but generally give a comfier ride.

- **Footrest** Reduces the likelihood of injury by the child's feet touching the ground or getting caught in the front wheel.

And check:

- Are there protruding parts that can hit your child's head or small parts that can detach easily and pose a choking risk?
- Are there gaps that could trap your or your child's fingers?
- Are there sharp edges or points on any surfaces?
- Is there a child-resistant mechanism for locks?
- Is the stroller stable enough not to tip easily?

Other features worth considering

- **Adjustable backrest** An adjustable backrest that can move to at least one semi-reclined position; some can be fully reclined (best for sleeping or babies under six months).
- **Front bar** A detachable bar that the child can hold onto when seated upright. It can also serve as a barrier.

- **Adjustable handle** A handle that can be adjusted to a comfortable height to suit different users.
- **Canopy** A canopy that can be extended to provide shade or shelter. Some have a viewing window so when it's extended you can still see your child.
- **Storage** A basket or tray under the stroller for carrying things like nappies, baby food, clothes and your handbag or backpack. Some models have a pouch behind the seat or other small pockets where you can keep small, lightweight items.

The following features may not be provided as standard, but may be available as optional extras — check the instructions or ask your retailer:

- **Tyre pump** A hand-operated pump for inflating pneumatic tyres.
- **Leg cover** A bag-like attachment you can pull over the child's legs for protection against the weather.
- **Rain cover** A clear plastic sheet you can drape over the stroller in wet weather.
- **Insect cover** A mesh cloth to protect the child from insects and other bugs.
- **Removable liner** This provides additional comfort, and can also help support smaller babies.
- **Leash** A leash on the handlebar that straps to your wrist and can prevent the stroller from running away in case you lose your grip while moving at speed. (However, there's some concern that the leash can be a strangulation hazard if it becomes accessible to the child).

Compensation for loss

The collapse of the Westpoint property group has highlighted gaps in Australia's consumer protection framework for financial advice. While it's little comfort to the Westpoint investors, who together lost up to \$400 million, the scandal has forced the Federal Government to propose a new and longer overdue compensation scheme for investors. Unfortunately the Commonwealth Treasury's preferred solution fails to understand the market for financial advice and will provide benefits for few, if any, investors who lose money as a result of the negligent or fraudulent actions of advisers.

The scheme proposed consists of little more than a requirement that financial advisers hold professional indemnity (PI) insurance. That's already the status quo for 60% of financial advisers. PI insurance covers the adviser against any liability to consumers and is subject to numerous limitations. However, it doesn't help the defrauded consumer if the adviser is insolvent or has acted in such a way that the insurance doesn't apply. And some PI insurance policies contain clauses that effectively exempted insurers from paying claims in relation to inappropriate advice to invest in Westpoint products. Other financial adviser firms have gone into insolvency, leaving those who sought financial compensation with no redress,

even when PI insurance had been taken out.

CHOICE wants a compensation fund set up to act as a safety net where PI cover isn't sufficient to meet a consumer's valid claim. This 'last resort' compensation scheme could be developed relatively cheaply using existing industry bodies such as the Financial Industry Complaints Service. Such a scheme is essential to increase consumers' confidence in financial advice.



COPYRIGHT LAW STILL FAILS CONSUMERS

Recent changes to copyright law have at last made legal some everyday consumer activities like copying your CDs to your computer or iPod ('format shifting') or recording a TV program to watch later ('timeshifting'). But new restrictions have been introduced. It's now illegal to override a copy protection mechanism even for a legal purpose such as format shifting.

The new laws also allow consumers to legally purchase and use multi-region DVD players that override any region coding. CHOICE has campaigned for the changes to timeshifting, format shifting and DVD region coding for many years, but we don't think the new laws go far enough — they remain strongly biased in favour of large copyright owners such as movie studios and music labels. For more detail see choice.com.au/copyright.

Xenical advertising banned

The National Drugs and Poisons Scheduling Committee recently withdrew permission for the weight loss drug Xenical (orlistat) to be advertised directly to consumers, but didn't change Xenical's status as an S3 'pharmacist only' drug (meaning you can buy it from a pharmacist without a prescription). CHOICE thinks if orlistat was a prescription-only drug, only people who fit the clinical criteria would be able to use it.

In its decision the NDPSA said it "noted the advice from professionals and consumers that direct-to-consumer

advertising increased pressure on pharmacists to provide orlistat to consumers. This in turn had the potential to result in inappropriate patterns of use, in patients for whom orlistat was neither indicated nor appropriate."

CHOICE welcomes the committee's decision regulating advertising of the drug, but the new arrangements will only be effective if pharmacists comply strictly with the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia Guidelines. As reported in CHOICE (Choice Cuts, March 2007), we found high levels of non-compliance with the PSA guidelines.

Our 19-year-old shadow shopper with a healthy weight (BMI 24.8) shouldn't have been sold Xenical, but 80% of pharmacists (24 out of 30) sold it to her.

See choice.com.au/drugmarketing for more on the marketing of drugs.



RECALLS & bans

NOVELTY SEED BOTTLE The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) has released a warning to consumers regarding the recall of a highly toxic novelty seed product. **Message in a Bottle** is a glass container with about 12 highly coloured, small red and black seeds. They were sold through small retail outlets and discount stores.

The problem The seeds have been identified as *Abrus precatorius*, which are highly toxic and capable of causing death if ingested. Other common names for the seeds include crab's eyes, rosary pea, jequirity bean, precatory bean and gidgee-gidgee.

What to do Don't open the bottle or handle the seeds. For more information call 1300 302 502.

FOOD Woolworths has recalled **Home Brand Dim Sims**, a 30-pack, 1.5 kg white cardboard box, with a best-before date of 19 Oct 07.

The problem They may contain small plastic pieces.

What to do Return them to the place of purchase for a refund.

FOOD McCain Foods has recalled **McCain Healthy Choice Creamy Chicken Carbonara**, 340 g, with a best-before date of April 2008, and the batch number ending with 287. It was sold in NSW.

The problem It may contain the Thai Beef Dinner instead of the Chicken Carbonara, and as such it could contain various allergens which aren't declared on the label.

What to do The product is safe in itself, but the Thai Beef dinner may contain dairy, soy, fish products, peanuts and tree nuts that pose a hazard to people allergic to these products. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call 1800 065 521.

TOY Red Dot Stores in WA have recalled **Military Series Play Set**, sold for \$2.99, with a barcode of 9338869000307, PLU 211-365.

The problem It contains a projectile that doesn't meet toy compliance guidelines.

What to do Remove it from the reach of children. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call 08 9350 6233 or email reddot@reddot.com.au.

TOY Sunshine International Trading has recalled the **Wooden Toy Name Train**, comprising engines and 26 letters, sold between September and December 2006 in Queensland.

The problem It doesn't meet product safety standards.

What to do Remove it from the reach of children. Return it to Sunshine International Trading, 36 Randolph Street, Rocklea 4106, for a full refund. Phone Charlie on 07 3275 3588 for further information.

TOY Kmart has recalled the **Madd Kidz Drink Bottle**, sold as part of the **W4K Fold-Up Trike with Tools** at Kmart stores since 25 September 2006.

The problem The bottle nozzle may dislodge and pose a potential choking hazard.

What to do Remove it from the reach of children. Return it to any Kmart store for a refund, or dispose of it. The trike itself is not affected by the recall. For more information call 1800 634 251.

TOY Associated Retailers has recalled **Megcos Hammerball**, barcode number 9826601077, sold in Toyworld stores since 18 May 2001.

The problem It contains small balls that pose a choking hazard to young children.

What to do Remove it from the reach of young children. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

BABY TOY Kids II has recalled **Bright Starts Star Teether Beads**, item number 8483, product number 074451084834, sold through Target, Toys R Us and independent baby product retailers since September 2006.

The problem The flexible plastic ring that holds the teether beads can crack or break, causing the beads to detach.

What to do Remove it from the reach of children. For information on receiving a free replacement call 02 9894 1855 or email francine.claxton@kidsii.com with your name, address and contact number.

VASE Ikea has recalled the **Parodi glass vase**, a 70 cm high, 5 kg vase, produced in black (article number 20110234), white (article number 501121199) and clear glass (article number 00079545). The Ikea logo, article number and supplier number (18347) are printed on a white sticker on the underside of the vase and on the receipt.

The problem It has been found to have too high internal stresses, which may increase the risk of breakage.

What to do Return it to your nearest Ikea store for a full refund.

BICYCLE Hunter Leisure has recalled **Huffy Fashion Days Bicycle**, sold at Kmart stores since July 2006.

The problem The brake lever doesn't comply with the Australian standard.

What to do Return it to any Kmart store for new brake levers to be fitted, or for a refund.

BABY PRODUCT Fantastic has recalled **Safety 1st Swivel Bath Support**, sold through Target, Big W, Toys R Us and independent retail stores between January and December 2006. The main body of the bath support is blue with green suction cups, and there's a blue, yellow and green set of rollers on the upper front frame. There's a warning label attached to the rear of the seat.

The problem After absorbing water, the warning label may fall apart.

What to do Stop using it. Check the warning label for signs of damage. If it's damaged, including tearing, fading or curling, return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

HIGH CHAIR Newell Australia has recalled **Graco Contempo High Chair**, model numbers 3800COU, 3800DRB, 3800FTM, 3800GGG, 3800GRM, 3800HEM, 3800JEN, 3800LEG, 3800MNS, 3800OWD, 3800SND, 3800TFE, 3800RIT, 3800HRL, 3804CNR, 3805BDA, 3810PEW, 3810PST and 3811PST, sold from December 2005 to December 2006.

The problem The high chair may collapse if it isn't fully opened and locked into place from the storage position prior to use.

What to do Don't use it until you've repaired it. To order a free repair kit, call 03 8787 3838.

BUNK BEDS The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission has accepted court-enforceable undertakings from Furniture Galore and Eternal Design to recall the **Fantasy Bunk Bed**, a novelty item in the form of a two-tier bunk bed with open windows.

The problem The ACCC is concerned about gaps in the bed that present a serious entrapment hazard to children.

What to do For more information call 1300 302 502.

CHILDREN'S CLOTHES Kmart has recalled **Hundreds & Thousands Girls' Hot Pink Shirted Top**, sizes 00-2, style number 0441176, available at Kmart stores since November 2006.

The problem The fusible backing on the flower embroidery may become detached, posing a choking risk.

What to do Don't use it. Return it to any Kmart store for a refund, or for more information call 1800 634 251.

CANDLES The Reject Shop has recalled **tealight candles**, pack of nine with a barcode of 2210451, sold in WA only.

The problem They don't meet the WA Fair Trading (Product Safety Standard) regulations.

What to do Don't use them. Return them to your nearest Reject Shop store for a refund.

CAR GM Holden has recalled the **Holden Captiva**, 2006, vehicles built between 14 June 2006 and 11 December 2006, with a VIN range between KL3CD26GJ7B002590 and KL3CD26GJ7B046492, and KL3DD26GJ7B012509 and KL3DD26GJ7B046283.

The problem The retaining clip connecting the brake booster push rod to the brake pedal may be missing, possibly resulting in loss of braking capability.

What to do Owners should have been contacted by mail, but for more information call 1800 033 349.

CAR Mitsubishi has recalled **WA Express vehicles**, 2005-2006 models. WA Express A/T, with a VIN range between JMFJEPB4V4A000286 and JMFJEPB4V6A000227, and WA Express M/T, with a VIN range between JMFJNPB4V4A000219 and JMFJNPB4V6A000227 are affected.

The problem Metal fatigue may affect the integrity of the tailgate gas strut retaining bracket, which may cause it to close unexpectedly.

What to do Owners should have been contacted by mail, but for more information call 1300 131 211. ■

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